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**UP AND OUT OF POVERTY:
Memoirs of a Street Activist**

by
Ron Casanova
as told to
Stephen Blackburn

CURBSTONE PRESS

mission, because I had become a Christian there, not just in word; I had become a believer. Although I understood the need for reprimanding me, the extremes they went to eliminated my desire to work with them, to be part of them. I realized that being a Bowery Mission-brand Christian had nothing to do with being Casanova.

In my experience, all institutions tend to want you to remain dependent on them. That's the welfare system, that's the AFDC, that's Christianity. It is great to go out and feed people, but it is more important to help people learn to feed themselves. It's like that old saying that if you *give* a man a fish, he will have food to eat that day and that day only; *teach* him to fish and he'll be able to get food for himself and have something to eat for the rest of his life. Moreover, he can teach somebody else how to fish.

I cannot stress this enough. I won't ever stop emphasizing it, because this country has built a population of dependents, people who depend on someone else for their lives. As long as you depend on someone else, you are in their control. You are not your own person if you are on Aid to Families with Dependent Children all the time, or on the dole from the church. If we have a system of AFDC that sets us up to be dependent on AFDC for the rest of our lives, then we are not our own masters. We cannot make decisions based on our own beliefs; we have to make our decisions by the guidelines dictated by AFDC, by the government, by the churches, by the people who then control our lives.

If a person is on AFDC on a temporary basis and is being trained to become self-sufficient, then that's another story. That is the way the system should ideally work. If somebody has a car with an engine that guzzles gas, they don't take a sledgehammer to the engine. The answer is not to destroy these programs, but to tune them up.

CHAPTER 14 Tent City

There are many things I haven't touched yet in my story, and many people that need to be in it. I have forgotten some of the events, some of the names and some of the dates. But I do know that on August 6, 1988, at two in the morning, I was standing in Tompkins Square Park near the entrance on Avenue B, across the street from a bar and a liquor store, holding a Bible in my hands, watching a riot between police and people in the park.

I always seemed to come back to Tompkins Square Park. That night I stood watching it all, watching over some of the homeless people who wanted no part of the clash and who were trying to sleep on benches behind the band shell. Right then I didn't even care if I was part of the world. At that time I was experiencing inner turmoil. I don't remember exactly, but I believe I was either contemplating leaving the Bowery Mission or had just left it.

A writer named Sarah Ferguson, who lived in the neighborhood, asked me that night why this group of homeless was outside the circle of violence.

"We just want to be left alone," I told her.

The police had told us to stay where we were in the park, and we did, so we weren't caught in the beatings. It felt like we were in a bubble that the raging violence couldn't touch. Later I painted a picture of that night which I titled "Shadow of Protection."

In the end, a lot of people got beat up in that action. One hundred and twenty-one complaints of police brutality got filed, although not one of the officers was ever convicted or punished, mainly because the court system would not find police brutality had occurred unless fellow officers said it had. And they were not talking.

Rather than put myself through the Bowery Mission program any longer, I withdrew. Hurting, disappointed in my life and the

world, I went out of control, I returned to my old ways of drinking and wildness, living in abandoned buildings and in Tompkins Square Park again. Once again alcohol was in control of me, not the other way around, like I sometimes believed. Though I did not commit any crimes or do needle drugs during that period, I was wild, reacting against the strictness and the unfairness of the Mission toward me.

After I left the Bowery Mission, I went back to Shanty Town for a little while, but by that time it was ruled by a homeless gentleman who was controlling people in the camp through alcohol, through drugs. With him it was all about power, but power just for him. That was not my cup of tea, so I went back to living in Tompkins Square Park.

I'll give credit to a Christian crew out of Jersey. I forget the name of the organization, but they used to come down there to Tompkins Square Park and try to talk religion to us, and they always brought us food. The Christians from Jersey would come down every Saturday to sing their Gospel songs, pass out their tracts and feed hundreds of people. They served the best food, so a lot of homeless from Queens and the Bronx came down on Saturdays to eat. Though the feeding was good, it brought all kinds of people, and not all the homeless were very friendly. Sometimes they were very angry, sometimes they would steal, sometimes there would be a fight.

Because of my recent experience at the Bowery Mission, I myself was feeling anger toward Christians at that time. In the beginning when the Christians from Jersey would come, I used to tell them "Please, leave me alone. I'm sick," or "I need a drink," or "I want to get high."

They were smart, however. They learned not to keep shoving their religion down our throats. They did not stop coming and showing their concern for us just because we refused to be listening to their Christianity. What convinced me of their sincerity is that they came back *despite* our refusal, because of their humanistic ideals, still feeding and clothing and listening to us.

For a time I moved in with some squatters at a building on 9th Street between B and C. While I was there, somebody from

the Bowery Mission tracked me down because they had something for me which came as a surprise: a good-sized wooden cross. All the time I was at the Bowery Mission I had been after the Mennonites to build me some wagons for hauling food around the streets to help feed people, and here instead they sent a cross. But I guess I must have smiled when I saw that cross because it had been put together for me by the Mennonite kids as a class project, and I had a fondness for those kids. As it happened, one of the squatters in the building was a black-haired Mennonite minister named Frank, who had a blonde wife and baby, so I donated the cross for the room in our building we had set up half as a kitchen, half as a meditation room.

That winter it got very cold, even for New York City. One night about the middle of December, 1988, my Polish brother Ed Rutter went to sleep on a park bench in Tompkins Square Park. Even in the winter, Eddie wouldn't go in a city-run shelter because he was afraid of getting hurt or robbed there. That night he had an overcoat, two blankets and a bottle to keep him warm. Another homeless man, Eliot Lopez, helped Eddie over to a bench next to where Lopez had built a fire in one of the park's metal trash cans. During the night, a police officer kicked the trash can over.

"No fires allowed in the park," the policeman said.

And the mercury just kept falling. It got down to five degrees that night.

By morning, Eddie had frozen to death. Lopez said Eddie's hand was reaching out to the scattered, cold ashes where the fire had been. Later when I heard what had happened, it made me angry, but scared, too. I thought of my own plight. I was almost 44 years old and without a secure place to live. I could end up like Eddie. But for the time being, all I did was drink until I forgot to be scared.

Unfortunately, at the squatters' building we had problems sometimes with the Puerto Rican brothers and sisters in the neighborhood because they considered squatters to be hippies, and they did not like the idea of all these hippies moving into their block. So most of the neighbors there did not like us. They

were the Latino rich; they were only into their cars and didn't think about the problems of people with no place to live. Partly because of that animosity, I quit living there and returned to the park.

It seems to me that it was around my birthday in 1989 when I ran across my old friend Red Wolf. I was sitting on a bench in Tompkins Square Park and he came by. We had not seen each other in ages.

"Hey, man, what's up?" he asked.

"Ain't nothin' to it," I said. "I left the Bowery Mission a while back, and right now I need a place to stay."

Red Wolf was on his way out of the city, but he pulled a tent out of his knapsack and gave it to me. I pitched the tent in Tompkins Square Park close to 9th Street and Avenue A.

Next day, Red Wolf was back. He ended up not leaving town, so we shared his tent. We were there about a day and a half when a friend of ours, a fellow named Spider, pitched a tent next to us. Next thing I knew, my good friend Gypsy showed up and set his tent up as well. Within that week we must have had anywhere from five to ten different tents in this one area of the park, and a number of the people in them had been part of the Casanovas. I felt a sense of security being with people I knew, a comradeship.

All kinds of people came to the park whether they lived there or not: African Americans, old Polish people and Ukrainians, Cubans, long-haired hippies and spike-haired punk rockers, Puerto Ricans playing *jibaro* music, skin-heads in steel-toed army boots, Jamaican rastas with dreadlocks. People walked their dogs while skate-boarders shot past concentrating chess players and heavy metal bands, and Reeboks were squeaking as pick-up teams played basketball while mothers walked their infants in strollers. But something different was happening this time. People who were coming to sleep in the park began to act aware

of themselves as a community. I felt happy because it reminded me of the Village in the old days.

People just kept coming. The police themselves, all over New York, began telling homeless people in the subways and doorways of the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens to go down to Tompkins Square Park. We had an influx of people coming in, pitching tents and building shacks. The park became a sanctuary. I guess the cops and the neighborhood liked it that way because while we were in the park we were not sleeping in their doorways. We were not blocking any businesses. At the time we did not realize that we would soon have to fight to live in the park. We did not know that we would have to fight to survive. And the police had helped to set up the scenario.

But June 1989 was fantastic. We were a festive combination of squatters, anarchists, activists and mostly just homeless people. Some people slept in the band shell, some people slept beneath the flat roof of the brick pavilion that was between the rest-rooms. We had a lot of homemade lean-to type tents made out of clear plastic stretched over wooden frames. They were about the size of pup tents. Refrigerator-box cardboard walls for some, store-bought tents for others. Tents pitched side by side on the hard-packed dirt underneath the park trees near park benches. People slept covered by blanket and sheets, or some had sleeping bags. We were getting a lot of clothes donations, which we hung up on fences for anybody who needed them and could use them. Beside each one of the tents we had campfires, and there was one communal campfire where we fed any people who were hungry. People in the neighborhood would go out and buy or collect food and bring it for our kitchen. People began to get the word that we were feeding the homeless and anybody was welcome.

I had experienced people living in the streets since I was young, a youth living in hallways. The general plight of the homeless did not really affect me back then; I only worried about myself. But by that summer of 1989, things had changed very drastically from the way they had been. I had never seen so many homeless people.

We had a veteran living in the park with us, another drinker, who we called Old Man John. Old Man John was disabled mentally; he couldn't live with his family, and his sisters couldn't take him—he couldn't live with anybody. In fact, he was a thorn in my side because he was a very aggravating person.

Old Man John was a coffee fanatic. He made sure we had coffee. If there wasn't coffee at the crack of dawn, I was the first person he would come to.

"Cas! Where's the coffee? Where's the coffee? Where's the coffee?"

I guess I had the patience of Job in those days to keep from kicking his ass. But he did not want to live in an institution, and I understood that. So I would get up and take the coffee pot somebody had donated and start boiling the water on the fire. We strained our coffee the best we could.

Old Man John also wrote poetry of a sort. He would jot down sentences, fragments of thought. A woman from the neighborhood used to put out a paper printed in Jersey called *Voices From the Street*. She somehow got John to write out one of his poems and she edited it down and printed it in her paper. Unfortunately, I lost my copy in one of the police raids that were to come.

Soon we had a lot of churches supporting us. One day some people we knew from Long Island brought a van full of food from a gourmet store. We had something like 18 boxes of groceries. We bagged them individually and passed the bags out to people who came by and needed the food.

Everybody and anybody could eat with us. At first we would be cooking on fires outside the tents. We did not have a stove. Then the Parks Department warned us no fires were allowed in the park, so when we finished cooking a meal, we put out the fire. So for a while the authorities left us alone. Eventually, however, they started messing with that, again saying no fires in the park. They brought in the Police Department and the Fire Department, trying to get our camp fires in the park extinguished. But that plan backfired. As it turned out, the police and firefighters went all over the park checking these fires. The

Police Department said there was nothing wrong with them. They were safe fires. The Fire Department also said they were safe fires.

Not happy at all with this result, the Parks Department went to court about it. This time it didn't go our way.

"Put them out," the court ruled. So we moved our cooking inside of a tent where we made ourselves a big stove out of bricks. Pretty soon we lucked out and got us a cook, a black dude by the name of Artie Wilson. He first came to the park because some of his friends had come to Tompkins Square from different institutional shelters. When we saw that Artie could cook, we got to know Artie very well. He became our official cook. Artie liked cooking for the people who came.

"People are here for various reasons," I remember Artie saying. "How you wind up in the park, you don't want to remember, but you *are* here, so we have to deal with it from there."

On that brick stove, Artie prepared food three to four times a day and fed several hundred people at each meal, and did a very good job of it. Our regular meal times were morning, afternoon and maybe about five o'clock in the evening. The neighborhood anarchists helped with the food. They worked out of a bookstore called Sabotage, which closed at four in the afternoon. Afterwards, they would come to the park and drop off chickens and vegetables. The anarchists liked to wear dark clothes, a lot of black, and they smoked cigarettes continuously. Frank, a Latino anarchist, dressed all in black and wore a beret. He had a narrow face and whiskers on his chin. Frank was very intense.

"We're facing a fascist police order in this city," Frank said one time, "that is out to attack and kill blacks and Latinos especially, but really is indiscriminate in terms of poor people in general."

In a big pot Artie would cook the chicken and vegetables the anarchists brought. Later at night the squatters would come by with more food and so we would eat again. The late crowd. We would pretty much be feeding people throughout the night because people would come at various times.

Neighborhood people would come down with their instruments and play music. One night a guy brought his portable xylophone and played while we sat smoking reefer and drinking beer and talking. On every bench you could see people sitting conversing, politicizing They were all comfortable here. It was a beautiful atmosphere.

I noticed a tall, slim woman talking with some people. I went over and introduced myself. She said her name was Karen Margolis, and she was an activist. Back in the 1950s, when she was only eight years old, she had gone on a CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Freedom Ride. Later she worked against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and in the '80s she opposed U.S. intervention in Central America. Until recently Karen had taught school in New York.

I expressed my interest in getting to know her. Well, that night she still left with the married couple she had come with, but in the days to come she became one of the neighborhood people who would come around bringing food.

Early in the morning Karen would be one of the first supporters to come to the park. She would come wake me, always bringing me something to eat. She was a lot of fun to wake up to. In the freshness of the morning Karen and I would sit and drink coffee and talk, and as the summer days passed, I learned about her. Karen had lived for a year on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with a dude she said "turned into the fiancé from hell." Karen told me that after she had gotten pregnant, her fiancé had gotten physically and mentally abusive. So Karen left him and spent a few months with a friend. Eventually she took the shelter route, moving into a shelter and going on welfare. She was 39 at the time.

In those days, Mayor Koch had a program for pregnant women whereby Karen was able to get into a low-income tenant co-op in the East Village. While Karen was living there, she had her son, and she named him Ethan.

"The name means 'strong'," she told me. "It's such a beautiful name."

I looked at Karen, this tall, willowy woman and thought that *she* was strong, *she* was beautiful.

"I'd like to meet Ethan," I said.

She then told me Ethan was in Kansas City, Missouri, with her parents, and that she was going to get him soon. I questioned Karen some more and learned that New York Hospital had told her that Ethan, two years old then, might be autistic. She tried to get him help through Medicaid, but the help didn't come. Her parents were well-to-do, and they had promised the best in help for Ethan, but only if Ethan stayed with them for a short while. So Karen took Ethan to stay with her folks. She had stayed in constant contact with her parents and had been assured by them that Ethan was progressing very well and that he was probably not autistic. But they told Karen that as yet Ethan was not quite ready to return home to her.

Our community grew, and we soon gave it the name of "Tent City." Things were happening fast. Tent City did not happen as a planned organization. There was no revolution, no movement there. It started as a place where people came because they needed a place to stay. We had no place to stay, so we went to the park and pitched a tent. It was people of like mind, comfortable with each other, sharing their space in the park. Tent City was open to anyone and everyone who rejected the city's so-called solutions to homelessness. We had a slogan: "No Housing, No Peace." Now that did not mean that we wanted a violent confrontation with the authorities. That meant we were not going to allow ourselves to be quietly put out of sight and mind in jails or dangerous shelters. That is no solution, that is burial.

Some of the squatters and anarchists and other activists from the neighborhood who were already in the antipoverty movement started talking to us about how to deal with the authorities. There were several groups and they all had plans and ideas. I would just pick out which one sounded the best to me and make suggestions along those lines to the Tent City residents. Usually they agreed.

Something was happening in Tompkins Square Park. All our lives we had accepted poverty as a way of life, whatever the reason. People had accepted welfare as a way of life. Now we

were doing things for ourselves. Outside the entrance to the park we set up a table with information about Tent City, poverty, homelessness, and about social services people could get and how they could go about getting those services. We began educating people about the politics of poverty. During the day, while most people from our park community would go looking for work or do their hustle to bring some money in, I would sit there in the camp and paint. That was *my* hustle. I would keep an eye on peoples' clothes and property while doing my art.

I would stretch a t-shirt over a section of cardboard and slant it off my knees as I sat up against a tree painting. Then we would sell them at the table we had set up. That summer I painted and sold a lot of t-shirts showing scenes from Tent City and Tompkins Square Park.

Since I had been living in the area off and on since the mid-'60s, I had a lot of friends in the street, a lot of people who knew me. Sometimes they and the more curious people from the neighborhood would come by the park to find out what Tent City was about.

"Why are you living in the park?" they would ask me.

First of all, I would explain, most of us in the park were single people, and we could not afford to rent. If you were to rent a room in Manhattan, you would be paying something like \$200 a week. First of all, if you could even find a room in that low a price range, the place would be roach-infested and filthy. You were lucky if you got a window. You were lucky if nobody broke into your room.

Let's say you are working and getting paid the minimum wage of 1996. You cannot even afford that rent. Do the math. For the sake of discussion, let's say you're getting paid one and a half times the minimum wage; hell, round it off to \$6.50 an hour. You might be able to make rent, if taxes don't take too much. But then where do you get the money to eat? What happens if you get sick? If you have kids, what about child care? How do you get

your laundry taken care of? What about transportation? Utilities? And on and on and on and on. The minimum wage needs to be tripled.

"Why don't you homeless go into the shelters?" some people would come by and ask me.

"Have you ever been to a shelter?" I would answer. "Have you ever been to the shelter on Wards Island? Go to Wards Island," I would tell such people. "Then take a walk through Tompkins Square Park to see the difference."

People in Tompkins Square had their problems, but they also kept their own kind of dignity, which you will not find among the fearful inmates of a shelter. The homeless of Tompkins Square remained individuals, refusing to become the beaten-down penitents that too many of the shelters want, demand, and make.

Kids did not live with us much at the park, although kids would come down there to visit a parent who was living in the park. Some of these kids came with their grandparents or some other relative.

Despite the fact that a lot of the shelters are terrible, there are reasons some people go there, even though they may not want to. Being homeless is hard on couples. If you really love a person, you don't want them sleeping on the ground and worrying about where they are going to eat. A homeless family living on the streets has an added problem: the welfare system or the courts will take away the kids if they catch up with that family. So if there is a homeless family that does not want to go into a shelter, they have to dodge the law so they can keep their kids with them. Some of the family people I have met in the streets are responsible parents. For example, they try to stay in one area so the kids can go to school, and if the kids get sick they take them to a clinic or hospital. But it is much more difficult to stay out of the shelter system if you have children or a loved one with you. Some families who do go into the shelter system don't want to, but they do it for the sake of their kids.

One of the biggest problems we experienced at Tent City was that the Parks Department would lock the public rest-rooms every day at 4 p.m. That made things difficult. At that time, counting Tent City and the other folks who were not part of our camp, you had anywhere from 300 to 325 people living in the park, including some women and children, and no bathroom after four o'clock. Of course that meant that you would get a bad smell in some areas. We preferred the rest-room to using the trees and the grass. We did not want to go to the bathroom outside, but we were left with no choice.

Late that month, the police told us to move to the other side of the park. We told them we did not want to move. Finally, Deputy Inspector Michael Julian, of the 9th Precinct, came in person. Julian was tall, slim, and fairly good looking. He had come into power under the banner of Bush's "kinder, gentler" phrase. But he was very condescending. He came over to us and told us we had to move to the Avenue B side of Tompkins Square Park.

"We'll leave you guys alone in this park if you go down to Avenue B and pitch your tents," he told us.

I said, "Hey, you gotta be crazy."

I told him we refused to go because that side of the park was drug-infested. That was where the people hung out who did the drugs, and we did not want to be bothered with that. We did not want anything to do with hard drugs. Imagine a situation with over 300 people living in the park at one time, and a little bit more than half were doing needle drugs. There were also people from the neighborhood who came to the park to buy needle drugs. In every section of the park except ours, they were dealing heroin and cocaine. We had created our own security force in Tent City, and we would kick out people who were doing heroin or coke.

Besides the hard drug situation, we had strategic reasons for not wanting to be bunched together into one crowd with everybody who was living in the park. Not all the people living in the park got along with each other. We had an ongoing feud with the punk rockers who lived in another part of the park. More

importantly, though, we were aware that a park curfew law was going into effect starting July 5th. We were aware that the parks department police were going to come and get us.

"There is no way you are going to put us in one bundle, one crowd of people and make it easy for you to come and get us out of this park," we told Julian. "We don't intend to make it easy for you, and we have no intention of leaving."

So we stayed where we were and Julian and the city officials stayed where they were—for the time being. Their stated reason for wanting us out of the park was bogus. They said they were concerned about the drug problems in the park. Drugs had been rampant in the park for years and the police ignored it. Now suddenly they were concerned.

One part of the problem was that since the police were sending any and all homeless people to the park, drugs in the park naturally increased. But the truth of the matter is, if it weren't for the fact that Tent City existed in Tompkins Square Park, they would not have done anything about the drugs. Once we started making noise about poverty and homelessness, the cops started putting it in the paper and in the neighborhood that the homeless people in the park were all drug addicts. They also said later for the *New York Times* that we had been living there for only a week, as if that lie could justify what they eventually did.

On Wednesday, the fifth of July, 1989, we waited.

Police were gathering, but nothing overt was happening yet. Over at Washington Square Park, a lot of skinheads had been burning American flags, demonstrating against anybody living in Tompkins Square Park. Then they left Washington Square Park, marching to Tompkins Square Park. They came into the park raising hell, trying to scare all of us out.

I was sitting in front of my tent with Red Wolf. We were just sitting there on one side of the benches, the skinheads and their crowd on the other side of the benches. As long as the skinheads stayed on their side of the benches and their side of the fences and didn't come to our tents, we were going to leave it alone. But Red Wolf and I sat ready with our pieces of pipe. Instead of

trying to calm down these skinheads, or walk them out, the cops just watched.

We passed the word around that the skinheads were coming. If there was not a unity among all the homeless people in the park, there were a lot of people who were scared, but not ready to lose their tents to the skinheads. It was bad enough we were going to get taken by the cops, but we were not going to let anybody else do it. Everybody started coming out from their tents, and even the punk rockers came over carrying sticks and pipes. They were with us.

We were ready to do business.

The skinheads were being surrounded, then. They were not only confronted by the homeless residents of the park, but also confronted by the activists and people from the neighborhood who were coming to our aid. That's when the cops started dispersing the crowd. As it turned out, most of the skinheads, seeing the crowd of homeless people with clubs and bats, realized they were not going to be able to do what they wanted so they backed off. So we had a rest that day.

At nine that evening the police force came.

More than 250 police in riot gear with long billy clubs advanced on the park, with about a dozen Parks Department police. Helmeted police on horses. Helicopters loudly chopping overhead. The police told all non-homeless people to leave the park. But by that time we had almost 200 supporters from the area.

At 9:30 three green Parks Department garbage trucks rumbled into the park. The line of police pushed us back, while the Parks Department workers came in tearing and ransacking, knocking down our handmade shelters with sledgehammers and axes and throwing food, clothes, and IDs into the garbage trucks.

The cops were already hip to the idea that Tent City contained the noise makers and the ones that were going to give them the problem, so they cleared out all the other shacks and tents in the park before they came to the Tent City area. This was Inspector Julian's "kinder, gentler" way—the same as all the rest: dragging off homeless people.

"Out of the park and into the street!" people were chanting. "No police state!"

This was my first time being involved in anything this heavy. As I watched, I was scared, but I was angry too. I had no intention of leaving because my blood was in that neighborhood. One of my daughters had been born on Ludlow Street nearby. My Polish friend had died on a bench there, frozen to death. All my life I had tried to escape New York and make a life. I had worked in New Jersey, Wisconsin and Florida. But by the night the cops came in, I was at the point where I didn't want to go anywhere else anymore. I no longer wanted to escape New York. This time I would not stand apart from what was happening.

When the cops were coming to tear down all the tents, Red Wolf and I stayed, as did some of the punk rockers and some concerned citizens from Jersey who were willing to stay there and maybe get their heads beat in. I decided I was going to sit there by my tent, and they would have to pick me up and take me away. An inspector or captain kept coming up to me.

"Take your stuff and leave," he would say.

"I'm not going to leave," I kept telling him.

At last he said, "If pretty soon you don't do it, we're going to have to come in and people are going to get hurt."

That was good psychology because I did not want any blood on my hands, especially of people we were trying to help. I did not want anybody to get hurt. So I told the guys to come on and we split.

One of our Tent City residents, a black man named Keith Thompson, was sitting on the ground crying, with one arm over his suitcase and his other clutching a garbage bag of his belongings. Armed police stood guard with their arms crossed or hands on their guns, making sure that no one stopped the Parks Department workers from trashing the belongings of the homeless. I watched as real litter got left in the park while the Parks Department workers threw everything some of us had—including ID, medication, and clothing—into the mouths of those big green trash trucks.

That is the moment I became an activist, when I saw the destruction. I realized that the government or powers-that-be could do that at any given time. Now it became personal.

As it turned out, we ended up going out onto Avenue A and 7th Street that night. That's where the real demonstration started taking place.

CHAPTER 15

Up from the Wounded Streets

That night, after the cops kicked us out of Tompkins Square Park, we gravitated toward 7th Street and Avenue A, the site of the bloody confrontation that people in the neighborhood were having with the police. The cops barricaded all park entrances and made sure their forces were numerous enough that nobody could get back into the park.

In response, over 400 neighborhood supporters, housing activists, squatters, and homeless proceeded to block the streets so that no cars were getting through all night long. The intersection at A and 7th was filled with people. More than 30 plainclothes officers were helping to arrest people. We ended up starting a bonfire in the middle of the block between 7th and 8th Street on Avenue A. Somebody set an American flag on fire. Firecrackers were set off under cars. Some people threw bottles and eggs at the police. Thirty-one people were arrested and others got beat up by the police or the skinheads. It seemed as if the cops did not care who they hit. They were indiscriminate. People came out of buildings, who knows, maybe just to try to get to the store, and they were attacked by police. It was a very bloody incident.

A fire truck pulled up. The firemen came with the intention of using the fire hose on us, but at first they didn't do anything. They just stood there and watched. By that time we had been there almost eight hours. Eventually Inspector Julian decided it was time to stop the fire and get the people out of the street. So they put out our bonfire, and we started another one.

Finally the authorities decided they had had enough of us being in the streets, so they let us back into the park. Everybody who still had any of their stuff brought it back in. But the police had destroyed most of the tents.

When they tore down our tents that night, I realized for the first time just how much they really didn't give a damn about me.

When they tore down my tent they were tearing down part of my heart. They took out everything, my clothes, my identification. If I had not held onto my birth certificate, I would have had no ID. When they took away people's ID, then those people in effect became homeless criminals. Because when they take that away, even though you might not realize it at the time, your identity is gone. Go look for a job without an ID. If you don't have ID when you apply for work today, they tell you to go get a green card. I was born and raised in the United States, but do you know how hard it is to get a green card with two federal arrests?

The cops came back about four o'clock the next morning. By that time the only people they had to confront were the people staying in the park, not the supporters from the neighborhood, who had gone home. When they came this time it was myself, Red Wolf, Spider, and a few others. They came in and ushered us out of the park. Then they tore down everything. It started raining the next day.

The cops and Parks Department had destroyed our tents, but neighborhood people brought materials for us to rebuild. We had a unity going with the neighborhood to where we had a backup of supplies. I have been told that during the Depression in the 1930s residents of this same neighborhood used to defy evictions by helping people carry their belongings back into apartments after evictions. This time they started going to the hardware stores and buying heavy-duty plastic, wood, and hammers for us.

Miriam Friedlander, a city council member, made a big public statement July 6th, complaining that the community had not been consulted about the raid and demanding that the city replace the possessions of the homeless that had been destroyed. She also called for them "to immediately rehab all city-owned buildings in the Lower East Side for low-income housing, and...cease harassment of the homeless." That sounded good for the moment, but that's the last I ever heard of that demand of hers.

The same day as the Friedlander statement, the New York Supreme Court ruled that the city could not prevent real estate speculators from demolishing or converting SROs—single-room

occupancy housing—into condominiums. Although that type of hotel shelter is not my favorite, the ruling showed the attitude of too many of the powers-that-be toward the homeless. Even Mayor Koch was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the ruling was a "devastating blow" to the effort to keep homelessness from spreading.

An example of this problem of gentrification was the Christadora House, a 16-story settlement house building in the Tompkins Square area which had once been used as a city welfare office and then kept empty for a long time, until it was yuppified, renovated into expensive condominiums for rich people.

At 1:30 in the afternoon that Saturday, which was July 8th, people marched past the Christadora House carrying a banner "HOUSING—NOT CONDOS." That was more laid-back than it had been in the spring, when the anarchists heaved cinder blocks through the Art Deco entrance as they shouted "Die, yuppie scum!"

Police patrol cars, paddy wagons and green garbage trucks lined 10th Street between Avenues A and B. The people marched on to the Ninth Precinct station on 5th Street to protest the raid on the Tompkins Square Park homeless. They carried a banner that had "NO CURFEW, NO EVICTIONS" painted on it, and posters that said "STOP WAREHOUSING APARTMENTS."

At the park, about 200 homeless and our neighborhood supporters held hands and linked arms around the new shelters we had built. A big painted banner strung up between two trees said "NO HOUSING, NO PEACE/SQUATTERS RIGHTS NOW." When six o'clock rolled around, about 70 cops in riot gear, along with Parks Department workers, who we called "Green Meanies" because of their green uniforms and general attitude, ripped apart our plastic tents. And again we put them back up. At 8:45 that night the cops swept through the park and cut down six tents. One person got arrested for playing a radio without a license. Interestingly enough, I got the feeling that some of the police did not like being part of pushing people out of the park.

We hung on to our place in the park. Somebody came up with the idea to evict Henry J. Stern, the Parks Commissioner from his home. It was the consensus among the various groups: yeah, let's do it. So I designed and painted a t-shirt for the occasion, and it was presented to Stern outside his office as he was coming down the stairs.

On July 12th, we marched to the home of Henry J. Stern, who lived at 510 East 84th Street, and placed an eviction notice on his door. About a hundred police blocked off the street between York Avenue and East End Avenue. We marched on to Gracie Mansion, which is where the mayor of New York always lives. At Mayor Koch's the police tried to get us surrounded, but we broke away, split up and scattered, with police after us. We knew the back alleys and thereby mostly eluded them, regrouping to march past the United Nations on our way back to Tompkins Square.

That night we celebrated in Tompkins Square Park, enjoying music and food, while a few police officers kept an eye on us. Somebody offered them a taste of some donated caviar on crackers and stuffed mushrooms, but they declined to eat with us.

Without exaggerating, I would say we were raided ten to twelve times that season. We could expect the cops any time, but usually when they did come it was when the people in the neighborhood were asleep or at work. Sometimes the authorities would leave the rest of the homeless in the park alone, coming specifically to Tent City to harass us.

"Why do you come to us?" I asked one of the Parks Department workers.

"Because we were told to come to you guys first," he said.

Each time the cops came for us, the neighborhood came back stronger after the cops left. The neighborhood people were becoming more involved. Food would come in and clothing would come in. From our table in the park we sold "Tent City" buttons, passed out flyers and collected food, clothing and medical supplies for the homeless in the park.

We had a lot of community support on the Lower East Side, organizations such as Emmaus Haus for women, run by Father

David Kirk; Homeward Bound; St. Augustine Church down near Grant; Trinity Church, downtown between Avenues B and C, which had been feeding homeless people for years; and a church called Graffiti Church, on 7th Street, which was another organization that had consistently fed the homeless. There was also Diane, a lady who for three or four years had been coming out to the park feeding people on Saturdays, Mondays, and Wednesdays. She had an abundance of food and connections. I had first met Diane several years earlier, before I had joined the Bowery Mission. It was snowing that Thanksgiving. She came down to the park with a busload of food—Thanksgiving dinners. She just brought it to us in the park and set it out. We had Thanksgiving Dinner for three days.

These groups of people and others like the squatters and the anarchists, as well as people who just lived in the area, came through for us. They were for real. Every time we ran out of equipment, they brought in more equipment for us to rebuild. The police would tear down, we would build up; they'd tear down, we'd build up. Tear 'em down, build 'em up. People were going to the hardware store all day long. The hardware store got rich that summer.

Not everybody who was homeless and in the park was in agreement on how to deal with our situation. Our side of the park held the activists. The rest of the park wanted nothing to do with us because we were making too much political noise. They felt like we were destroying their harmony with what they had in the park. In reality, they had next to nothing, but they did not want to lose even that little bit.

I understood how they felt. I myself had been one of the people who was, if not content, afraid to make any changes, afraid to make any noise, content to be on that bench because I could see no other place to go. Afraid to lose that spot.

After we had been raided about the second or third time in July, we received a visit from some people from Philadelphia who came specifically to meet us. They told us of something called

a "National Survival Summit" that was coming up in Philadelphia. One of the people who talked to us was Leona Smith, a dignified black lady, a former homeless person and the president of an organization called the National Union of the Homeless. We were told that she and another homeless person named Chris Sprowd had started the Union of the Homeless themselves, and that 90 percent of the board was made up of homeless or once-homeless people. The Union had a shelter run by homeless people.

These facts made some difference to me. While I still did not like shelters, the fact that these folks had homeless people in control of it was a different story altogether.

A brother named Willie Baptist, wearing a baseball cap, also talked with us. Willie was a very articulate dude. He called himself a "political educator" and said he was also a member of the Union of the Homeless, and of another organization called Up and Out of Poverty.

All that afternoon we talked and talked and talked about the homeless situation and the differences from the way it had been in years past. Talked about if anything had changed in the past few years about homeless people.

"Nothing has changed," I said.

"That's not true," somebody else said. "Think about it. There were homeless people before and a lot of them fought their situation, but you didn't have the struggle then the way you have it now."

I realized that was true. In 1989 one-bedroom apartments in the neighborhood, on Avenue A, were commonly costing \$1,200 a month. Prices kept going up. Even the Cherry Tavern, the down-to-earth Polish bar I used to frequent, had started going yuppie, trying to appeal to the rich. (The Cherry Tavern would end up closing down anyway.) The consensus of our talk with these folks from Philadelphia was that there were more people who were homeless, but there were also more people involved with the homeless struggle than there had ever been before. That much progress had happened.

For Leona and the others to come talk with us was a reinforcement of our resolve. Before they came, we thought we were alone in our fight. All we knew was that we were hurting, we were fighting to survive. Now it seemed that there were other people who were fighting the same fight.

We had a Tent City meeting to discuss the so-called summit. One of our people, a fellow named Justice Robles, felt it was a good idea.

"Our government," he said, "would rather see us under the ground than lying on top of the ground. They would rather have us buried underneath Tompkins Square than sleeping on top of it."

Somebody mentioned my name as a candidate for attending the Philadelphia conference.

"I don't want to leave the park," I said. I still thought my plight was only in Tompkins Square Park. That was where the immediate battle was, where people were going to jail.

"Cas, we want you to speak for the homeless living in the park," somebody said. At that time I still did not fully understand my position, but Karen Margolis and a majority of the Tent City homeless finally convinced me that it might be a good idea for me to go and represent them, to speak for the homeless of Tent City. There was something in the air and Tent City wanted to be part of it.

I still wasn't very happy as the contingency from Tent City traveled to the survival summit in a van driven by David Green and Shigemi, who were with an organization called Homeward Bound, one of the sponsors of the event. But now I was curious. Leona had told me that there were going to be Indians—Native Americans—at this meeting, as well as coal miners and other organizations fighting against poverty. My curiosity, more than anything, got me to the summit.

I went with two other homeless people from the park, Justice Robles and a black woman named Darleen Bryant, who liked her nickname of "Mama." That night the organizers put us up, along with other summit participants, in nice student quarters at St.

Joseph's College in Philadelphia, two to a room. It was decent, and that impressed me.

The next day, the three-day conference, organized by the National Welfare Rights Union and the National Union of the Homeless, began in the auditorium at St. Joseph's College. I do not think I can truly put into words the emotions I felt when I walked in there to that conference and saw all those people. The vitality of the struggle against poverty struck me. This was the first time I had ever seen so many people, and such a variety of people, together for the same purpose of doing something about their plight themselves. I couldn't help but get caught up in the enthusiasm. About 50 people from 30 to 40 states showed up, representing people from various races, young and old, from all walks of life, all different organizations, not only the Union of the Homeless and Welfare Rights, but also others such as Up and Out of Poverty. You had the American Indian Movement and coal miners concerned about black lung and welfare rights activists and kids against drugs. Maybe more women than men.

Then, when people started getting up and talking, it was as if I was speaking. It was phenomenal to see other people's struggles, hear their fights and ideas and get inspired at this unity. Nearly everyone who stood up and spoke touched me and my life and the life that we were living in New York. It was as if we were all living the same life, but in different places. It almost freaked me out. It sure woke me up. It was the best thing that could have happened to me.

I liked the name of the group from Minneapolis, which was called Up and Out of Poverty, and was led by a woman named Cheri Honkala. I thought that was a good banner to be under because this issue of poverty encompassed all the other issues we were dealing with.

Then I heard Leona Smith speak. She was wearing a black-collared t-shirt and a dress. I found her to be a forceful, earnest speaker, and she emphasized her points with her index finger. I could see the emotion in her talk and realized that she was a person who deeply cared about other people. She herself had experienced being homeless in the streets. She was a very strong

go-getter, vibrant not only in organizing, but also in getting out and talking to the politicians. But it was more than that—she was not just a talker; she had been to jail for what she believes in.

I learned that Union of the Homeless also had a school where they taught political science as it pertained to their lives and the future of their kids. They had a program called Dignity Housing. They would take people out of shelters and put them in a house. The only obligation for the people in the house was for them to go to school, learn a trade, and/or get a job. And they had to put time back into the Dignity Housing Program—put back some of what they got.

All things considered, Union of the Homeless impressed me quite a bit. They were changing the situation. Instead of "advocates" being in control, the homeless themselves were gaining control of their own destinies.

After Leona spoke, a heavysset black sister in glasses, wearing a yellow baseball cap and a red sweatshirt, led the group in a cheer:

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Fight!"

Tent City made an agreement with Leona Smith and Union of the Homeless to have our own homeless convention in Washington, D.C., and take part in a "CD" or civil disobedience in Washington on the sixth of October, the day before a big nationwide protest rally against homelessness. We were intent on taking over the HUD building.

On about the third day of the summit I finally got to speak. I was bearded, with a moderate Afro, wearing a black t-shirt with a few buttons up near the neck. Justice and Darleen and I introduced the fact that Tompkins Square Park Tent City intended to build tents out of American flags. As I spoke I rapped my hand with a rolled-up agenda, explaining how we thought if we used the American flag as a symbol of protection, that would prevent the cops from destroying our tents.

The response to our plan at the summit was tremendous, it impressed me. People were jumping out of their chairs and clapping hands and cheering. Our announcement went over so

grand and gloriously that I thought, oh well, it looks like I'm in this for a while.

What enthused me the most about the Summit was the reinforcement of the realization that if I wanted to get my life straightened out, I could not depend on anyone else to do it for me.

We were doing for ourselves in Tompkins Square Park. There were no real alternatives. All we knew was that we needed housing and we needed jobs, but we had no idea of how to get them. By then we were thinking in terms of organizing politically, but we did not know exactly how to go about it. And before going to the summit I thought we were alone in these troubles. My job for the homeless of Tompkins Square Park had been to go to the Survival Summit and find out what was happening with other people like us. What the Summit did for me was to give me more courage, knowing that Tent City was not alone, that things were happening all over the country, and there were people all over doing the same things we were doing. So it kind of built me up. I started waking up my consciousness.

On Saturday, July 22, 1989, the day that the flags were scheduled to go up in Tent City, we were still at the summit. I wanted to get back to New York so bad that I put pressure on Darleen and Justice.

"Come on, let's go," I said. Darleen and I ended up leaving Justice at the conference.

We came back into Tent City with just enough daylight to see our tent made out of American flags. A rope had been strung between two trees, and then four flags—big flags, about seven or eight feet by four or five feet—had been attached to the rope side by side, the blue fields of stars up near the rope and the red and white stripes angling out, fastened to the ground. A gathering of people were sitting on the ground beneath the shelter of this tent. A couple of other people were walking around holding a banner somebody had painted: "KOCH VS HOMELESS." The area was beautiful. We even had an art festival going. People were there in the park with their art. People were eating and it was a festive day. People were everywhere. It seemed like the Fourth of July, like our own independence day.

When it started getting dark, the Parks Department came and told us we would have to break down the structures. Of course, we were not about to take them down. So the Green Meanies backed off for the night.

In the warm, humid dawn 20 cops in riot gear formed a line standing shoulder to shoulder, facing our line of homeless. Behind the cops a dozen or so Green Meanies waited.

For the moment I almost believed they would respect the symbolic refuge we were claiming by using the flags.

Then the cops moved in, fighting us, tearing down all the flags. There was a tug-of-war between the police and us for the flags. Though we gave them a struggle, by 7 a.m. the helmeted cops had folded up our flags and taken them away.

I had come back from the Summit politicized, which now influenced my strategizing. On July 25th we got a flyer typed up. A well-educated black man named Thomas was our press man, our computer whiz, our brain. Thomas had parents he could have moved in with, but he stayed downtown, he stayed working with us in the streets. Although he liked computers, he preferred to work in a socially conscious atmosphere. He worked with us and he worked with the Tenants Association.

Thomas put out our flyers, printed our newsletters and did our press releases. In the July 25th flyer we noted that, "We now are organizing, educating, and feeding one another without institutions to guide us to: drugs, alcohol, TB, AIDS, and Criminal Ways of Thinking." It was signed by me as chief representative, a dude named James Naphier as chief of security, and Chris Henry as Public Relations for what we called C.H.S., or "Creating Housing Somewhere."

Our lawyer found out that the police had taken our flags to somewhere in Long Island. I guess they were figuring we had neither the money nor the support to go all the way out there and get the flags back. Fortunately, we had a receipt for them. We got a ride out to Long Island from a lawyer friend of Chris Henry and his lady, Barbara Henry. Chris was one of the founders of Tent City and a member of the Tent City board of directors. Barbara was our secretary. We went with a couple of supporters who had

given up the money for the flags in the first place, and we got the flags back on July 31st.

The day we got the flags back, we put up the flag tent again. Since the parks department had still refused to agree to our proposal to keep the bathrooms open on a 24-hour basis and were still officially outlawing any temporary structures in the park, we also proceeded to build another eight shelters.

The police and the Parks Department left us alone at first, probably because we had such a big turnout of supporters. We were told that we had until 6 a.m. before the authorities would come in.

But this time the attack came just before midnight. Most of our supporters and the curious had drifted away as 40 to 60 police in riot gear came against us, along with about 40 Green Meanies and a couple of dozen maintenance people. This time they threw all the flags except one in a garbage truck, along with all our food and clothes and property. That showed us how much the flag meant as a symbol of protection.

The last flag we managed to get away from them. We had a tug-of-war, yanked it over the fence and got away with it.

Nearly a week later, on the night of August 6, 1989, a year after that first big police riot, the homeless of Tompkins Square Park were again forced out of the park. We were told by Inspector Julian and some of his task force that around four o'clock or five o'clock in the morning they would be coming in to take everything again. So we were on vigil, waiting.

At the brick, flat-roofed pavilion between the rest-rooms, people were sleeping. A Green Meanie came over and politely said, "We're getting ready to clean up this area. Could you get all your personal belongings, please?"

They had more than one team of Parks Department workers. One guy from the Parks Department talked with me. He was a heavysset young white dude.

"We're going to clean the entire park, section by section, starting here," he said.

"What about the tents?" I asked. I was a little bit hoarse that morning. I had a butterfly bandage on my right cheek from the previous encounter with the authorities.

"You'll just have to take them down while we do the cleanup," he said. "We're not looking to confiscate. What we're asking is that everything be physically moved off the benches because we're going to clean the park."

"You're saying that we have to take everything outside the park?" I asked.

"If you take it outside of the park, that's even better while we do the cleanup. We've got a 40-man crew here simply to clean the park."

"Why can't we just pick everything up," I asked, "put them on the benches and get it out of your way?"

"Because we're going to clean around the benches, in the benches, down the benches. Everything's going to get cleaned."

My friends and I talked over what to do.

"They want us out of the park," somebody said.

"We could stop traffic," Chris said.

"All right," somebody else agreed. I turned to the Green Meanies a little ways off from us.

"You're not going to like what we do," I said. "We'll take it out, but you're not going to like it."

We went around informing the other residents of the park of the situation and what we intended. We started gathering what little we had in the way of possessions.

"What's most important?" a guy asked. "The food or the blankets?"

"The food."

It was August. In the winter the answer would have been different.

"Food," I said, "because right now we're going to be sleeping on the street."

Ultimately we held on to all that we could and tried to keep the Green Meanies from trashing the rest. When we saw them filling their garbage trucks with our belongings, tossing them into the backs of those trucks, we could not help getting agitated and provoked, and calling them names.

I went up and grabbed a metal cabinet out of the back of the garbage truck. At first they tried to stop me, but then the black

Parks Department man wearing glasses and a blue t-shirt stopped them.

"All right," he said. "Is it yours? Take it out of here."

So we moved out of the park early that morning, but we put whatever bedding we managed to salvage out right in the street, blocking traffic. People just lay down in the street on their pads. I myself was sitting in the middle of the street on Avenue A on my spread-out sleeping bag near a Parks Department dump truck. One of the homeless had put up a sign "THIS IS OUR LAND." Somebody else had made a sign that said:

- NO
- NIGHT-STICKING
 - GLASS THROWING
 - BEAT-UPS, BY
ANYONE!

I was mad. I started drinking beer and got even angrier. I was standing in the street with a bullhorn in one hand and a brown-bagged quart in the other.

"No housing, no peace!" I shouted. "It don't make no difference what anybody says. Just remember what we're here for. Fuck what anybody else says! We're here to get homes, food, clothing..."

Not my most persuasive speaking engagement, but I was feeling frustrated. Still, no traffic was getting by, so I was not the only frustrated one.

That night people kept demonstrating. There was singing and lots of yelling. Cops chased down demonstrators and broke up the protest.

"It's over," one cop kept saying. "It's over. It's over."

People were videotaping the proceedings, and at a paddy wagon one plainclothes cop can be seen growling at the cameraman in Nith LaCroix's video *First Anniversary Tompkins Square Riot Demonstration*.

"Take a walk, asshole," he says.

Next morning the sergeant of police came to us in his crisp, white, short-sleeved shirt. It went like this:

"You're welcome in the park," he said.

"They told us to get out," we said.

"Your complaint was you were asked to leave the park," said the sergeant. "Now you're invited back into the park, so I wish you would just vacate the street, so the people can get back to work."

"But we were told to vacate the park."

"Okay," he said. "You're welcome back into the park. Right now you're obstructing traffic. You're welcome to go back in the park right now, all right? You're welcome to go back in and keep your stuff."

That's the way it went. We were stubborn. We had still more battles with the cops, fighting with them almost continuously the rest of the summer and into the autumn. But we were still in the park.

CHAPTER 16

The New Exodus March

WBAI, a community radio station in New York, had Tent City on the air quite a bit. Being on the radio helped us get the word out to more people about what was happening at the park and how we were working to change conditions for the impoverished. In September of 1989 people started coming down to the park telling us about a big march that was going to be happening in a few weeks. They told us Mitch Snyder's Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) and the National Coalition for the Homeless had got a lot of money to do a "Housing Now!" march from Boston to Washington, D.C. The idea was to bring to the public's attention the severity of the problem of homelessness and to raise support for dramatic increases in low-income housing.

Then David Green and Shigemi of Homeward Bound contacted us about the march meetings being held at the union hall for the Hospital and Health Care Employees Union Local 1199, which was a place where people often gathered to have meetings to organize on various issues. As part of the meeting, a big dinner was planned for the homeless to help prepare them for the march. People had gotten to know Tent City, so we were asked to run a workshop.

So Tent City went to the meeting and set up a table with literature telling people what we were about. The people in charge of the meeting put on a big, dynamite dinner of different varieties of ethnic foods, and after dinner a show with some name-brand entertainers. It was all free, so a couple of hundred homeless people came. These were people who, like ourselves, were disgusted by the shelter system, fed up with other people advocating for them, and enthusiastic about getting organized to make changes.

Filled with good food, people listened when the Housing Now! and CCNV people began talking about how they had the

funds and the means to support people on the march to Washington. Comfortably digesting a rich meal, the homeless believed these organizations when they began promising that they would provide food for the marchers, arrange accommodations each night, have a medical van driving along with the marchers all the way to Washington, and even provide rain gear and shoes. Among the homeless there that night I saw a lot of enthusiasm for this march and for being in the fight to get out of poverty and out of the streets. In those days it still amazed me to find so many homeless aware that it was time for them to do something about their own plight. It made me more attuned to the fight. Listening to the homeless speak had me feeling optimistic.

However, I was leery of how the march was being set up. While the Survival Summit in July had been made up mostly of grassroots organizations, the 1199 meeting in September was conceived and run by more of what I call the "establishment organizers." Even though groups like Tent City and the National Union of the Homeless were there participating, the Coalition for the Homeless, CCNV, and an advocacy group called the National Low-Income Housing Coalition dominated the proceedings. These organizations needed homeless people in order to make their march work.

"We have got to be the ones to make changes for ourselves," I said when it was my turn to speak. "The time has come to stop letting other people talk for us. Nobody can tell you your problems better than you. Nobody but me can tell you why I am homeless or why I need this or if I need this. I don't want no Mitch Snyder from the Community for Creative Non-Violence speaking for me. I don't want Housing Now! or Coalition for the Homeless or any of these people speaking for me. Because they can't. They don't know anything about me."

I could see a lot of homeless people nodding their heads in agreement. You could hear them respond to the idea of being their own advocates. We did not care about any organization called Housing Now!, only the fact that if there was any reason to march, it was for "housing now!" It was this response of the homeless that convinced Tent City to commit to going along on the march. We were ready and willing to take the risk.

If I had offended the sponsors of this feed, or shocked them, they played it cool and hung back on the fringes. They had got the people to this meeting, they had met the quota of homeless they needed if their march was going to work.

However, Tent City was becoming a symbol of the broader homeless situation. With this in mind, prior to the march on Washington we took part of our camp to the United Nations Plaza to bring into public and maybe international focus the point that homelessness is not just Tompkins Square Park, it's not just New York City, and it is not a problem you can solve by outlawing camps or by cramming people into rat-infested, tuberculosis-ridden shelters. You cannot solve the condition by sweeping parks and throwing everyone out or arresting them. Somebody in Tent City came up with the slogan "Tompkins Square Everywhere," which was both pointing out the widespread crisis of homelessness and poverty, and also calling for the homeless everywhere to resist being disposed of.

At the U.N. Plaza, a group of Chinese people had set up a camp to protest the military violence at Tiananmen Square. Usually camp demonstrations are not allowed at the U.N. Plaza, but the Chinese students had been given permission. Portable toilets had even been set up for them. The Chinese were cool; they supported us in our struggle and let us set up by them. We set up tables distributing our literature and selling t-shirts I had painted.

Karen Margolis was there with us. All summer she had been supporting us a lot, even though she didn't live in the park. By this time, Karen had gone to Kansas City, Missouri for the second time to bring her son back to New York. But she told me that when she reached her parents' house, she had been met by a process server with a thick bunch of papers stating that Karen's parents had been appointed co-guardians and co-conservators of Ethan, and that as such they retained custody of him pending any further court order. Karen went to several lawyers, but couldn't get anybody to represent her because she had no money. One woman lawyer told her that her parents had tricked her.

"Let me take a look at the papers," I told her.

Karen got me the papers, and I showed them to some of my friends at Welfare Rights and at the Anti-Hunger Coalition. I wrote letters and my friends wrote letters to Legal Aid in Kansas City. Eventually Legal Aid sent Karen a list of attorneys in Kansas City. Soon the case was accepted by a lawyer, and Karen was able to begin legal proceedings on behalf of her son.

Meanwhile, we had managed to stay at the U.N. Plaza about a week or so without any authorities bothering us. Then the police and Parks Department must have figured out who we were because one day they came up to the U.N. Plaza and started harassing us. Although the Chinese people were allowed to camp there, the police started enforcing the 1:30 a.m. curfew on us. They chased us out that night, telling us we were not allowed to sleep there at night. They even told us we could not use the porta-potties that had been set up for the Chinese protesters.

Well, when you got to go, you got to go. One thing led to another and seven of us got arrested and taken to jail for trying to go to the bathroom in porta-potties.

By September of 1989 the squatters' movement and Tent City were tight. We had done a number of actions together. Our squatter friends were very good at what they did, which was locating usable abandoned buildings. John, the spearhead of the squatters, came to Tompkins Square with his lady to talk with me and the people of Tent City. They told us they were planning to occupy the old Public School 105, which had been abandoned for five to ten years. Addicts were now using it as a shooting gallery. The squats planned on cleaning it out and inviting homeless people in there.

Tent City held a few meetings on the issue, talked about it and decided it sounded like a workable idea. Tent City would join them when we got back from the march to Washington.

Meanwhile, the rest-room situation at Tompkins Square continued to be a problem. More office buildings in the area were locking their rest-rooms, and more restaurants, even fast-food

establishments, would not allow someone who appeared homeless to use the rest-rooms. People with homes take going to the bathroom for granted. Put yourself in the position of the homeless person—not having a place to go in has a very strong effect on a person's dignity. So the public rest-room in the park was a very important issue. We needed it open past four in the afternoon. Otherwise, you got the health problem of people using the park itself for a bathroom.

We finally came up with a plan of chaining ourselves to the fixtures and the doors in the rest-room. But we also had another agenda, and that was to get to Washington on the march, so I didn't want anybody going to jail at this late point. Since we needed as many people on the march as we could get, we needed a strategy to keep the bathrooms open, but one that would also keep us out of jail.

I figured the police did not really want a major confrontation over the rest-rooms. I took it upon myself to let the information about our plan of chaining up to the rest-room leak to one of the homeless people we knew was dealing with the police. It worked: the authorities got wind of our plan.

Next morning around five or six o'clock, a couple of Parks Department men came to my tent and woke me up. They called me out to the side.

"How can we help?" they asked. "How can we work this out?"

I was pleased. They had decided to negotiate.

Tent City ended up getting the bathroom open 24 hours a day. In fact, Tent City was put in charge of the rest-rooms; we had the responsibility to monitor and secure the facility ourselves. We proceeded to clean the rest-rooms and get rid of anybody who was shooting drugs in there. We put together our own first aid setup and established rape prevention security. We even helped the police get rid of the drug addicts in certain areas of the park.

Meanwhile, some Parks Department employees got fired because they refused to do everything they were told to do about getting us out of the park. Others quit because they didn't like what they were told to do.

Maybe it was a small victory, but with it people got to see that, wow, we were not just running our mouths, we *were* getting something done. People were able to see that if we stuck together, there were possibilities of making progress. From that little bit of bathroom victory, all the homeless of the park were drawn closer together.

So it was that when we joined the Housing Now! march, it was as a united band of people who said, "We are going to Washington and we are going to be heard and we are going to be the ones talking. We are not going to let somebody else talk for us." As I have said, I was not going on the march because of the organization called Housing Now! I was marching because of the words themselves, "Housing Now!," because that was what we needed. I joined the march in order for homeless people to speak for themselves to the people running the government.

When the day came, only a handful of us from Tent City and Tompkins Square Park made the march. Karen came along. Thomas, the computer whiz of Tent City, came too. There was Chris Henry, his wife Barbara, Artie, Stanley, myself, and Terry Taylor, also known as "The Minister of Madness." Terry was a tall, slim, dark-skinned wild dude. He was angry and stayed drunk a lot. He was angry about the conditions of living in the park and about poverty. Last, but not least, there was Old Man John, who had bad feet.

Also on the march came representatives of Emmaus House and the United Homeless Organization (UHO), as well as people from the various homeless shelters. It's a sad truth, but a lot of them probably lost their bed space in the shelters and weren't able to get back into them. But they felt it was that important for them to get out there and speak for themselves. A lot of women living in shelters came on the march with us.

We started out from the U.N. Plaza at seven o'clock in the morning, around the middle of September, 1989. We wore these yellow and white hats that said "New Exodus" on them. Our Chinese friends gave us a gift of money for the march out of their collection. The woman, the mother, pulled \$60 for Tent City out of their pot of donations. That got us started.

From the first step I was scared because I knew the power of the government. If they wanted to, they could stop us very easily. They had proved that a long time ago with Hooverville, when they ran tanks and cavalry through the tents of the veterans and their families. To this day I'm not sure why the authorities did not stop us with force. Maybe they felt we did not have enough power to bother with, or more likely they were counting on the establishment homeless organizations to keep everybody in line.

The day was cloudy and a little cool. None of the people from Housing Now! or CCNV or Coalition for the Homeless did any walking. They were staff. Only the homeless walked. Hurricane Hugo was blowing in, but we were not too worried because the Housing Now! people had promised they would provide rain gear. As it began raining, they began passing out the so-called "rain gear"—black plastic garbage bags. And they did not even have enough of those to go around. I took out the wine I had brought along and began drinking.

We walked in the rain across Manhattan to the river. At that point Karen Margolis left us to keep an appointment with her lawyer about to make arrangements about her son. When we began boarding the Staten Island Ferry, Mitch Snyder arrived in a car and took a look at us all getting on the boat. I shook his hand, but I felt that he was avoiding me. It was probably just as well. He was too friendly now with the establishment to suit me, and I did not think there was enough input from the homeless about how the march was going to go. We did not see eye to eye, and had we got to talking, I would have probably told him what I was thinking about the wonderful rain gear. With the media there, however, any argument would only have served to detract from the march.

Snyder took the ferry over with us, but he was gone soon after that. As we marched across Staten Island, I thought back about my time there and wondered if any of the nuns or priests were watching the marchers, and what they would think if they knew what I was involved in.

The State Police met us when we reached the Jersey bridge. As a pedestrian you had to go up a spiral stair to get onto the bridge. Our intention was to march down the middle of the road, blocking traffic, thereby making more people aware of our march and our cause.

The Jersey state troopers had a different idea. They were waiting for us at the base of that stair and ordered us go single file and only on the sidewalk of the bridge. When word was passed back to me that the police would not let us cross the way we wanted, I barged to the front. I was drunk, so I wasn't in control. I was angry and started cussing out one of the State Troopers.

"You can't stop us!" I raged.

The officer pulled out his pistol and stuck it right at my nose.

"I ought to blow your head off," he growled.

Have you ever seen a cartoon where all of a sudden the cartoon character gets so scared that all the color drains out of him and he turns white? That's the way the alcohol went out of me as I stared down the barrel of that officer's magnum.

The policeman would not or could not shoot because there were too many people. And his boss told him to back down.

We did it their way. It took us a long time, almost an hour, to get everybody across the bridge single file, using only the sidewalk. The wind began blowing the rain harder. Hurricane Hugo was at his best. As we walked, I watched the other marchers, struggling through the messy gray weather toward a dream of a better life. Troubled by my behavior with the officer, I did some heavy thinking.

When I first got involved in organizing that summer, I had a very selfish motivation: I wanted to *live*. I wanted to get off the street, I wanted to eat, I wanted decent clothing. I want that really understood: I went at this to save *my* life. I had no real concern for other people. (Maybe I did, but because I was in so much pain from my own life, I couldn't admit anybody else's pain.) Though I had been to the summit and other meetings with other groups, until the march I didn't have a real conception of a movement of a larger community of people working together to help each

other. But I had been noticing that as I fought for the things I needed, I coincidentally ended up helping other people get the same things. The people of Tent City had psyched me into believing that I was a leader. In the little bit of time between the Survival Summit and the march, I had learned that people *did* listen to what I had to say.

Walking in the rain, I realized that if I was going to be an effective leader, I had better get smart and not be doing stunts like drinking a lot of wine and needlessly antagonizing the police. You can run your mouth all you want, but when you are actually out there, facing the enemy, that's a heavier thing.

Looking back at the more than 200 people beginning this march so hopefully, including a number of pregnant women, I realized that I cared. I knew we could be charged by the police at any time. We were going out there against Washington, the Establishment. Back when I was eight years old, I had made up my mind to become a social worker, a better one than they had in the orphanage. More than just the handful of Tent City homeless had been banking on what I did in that moment facing the policeman's gun. In that moment I felt the weight of those hundreds of lives. Never before had I had the push to become truly socially conscious, a community-minded person.

This was my opportunity. Our opportunity.

I threw away my booze. From that point on I have not had a drink of alcohol, nor have I done illegal drugs. That moment facing the bullet I truly recognized and accepted my responsibility as an activist for homeless people. Prior to that, whenever I stopped drinking or drugging, I had nothing to exchange for my alcoholism or drug addiction. There was nothing there, no substance. So I always went back to my old ways. When I started realizing my art, I started realizing I had a voice, that there was more to me than just getting high. But it took looking down that gun barrel, it took becoming part of the movement rising up and out of poverty to give me a substance.

Karen rejoined us when we got to the Jersey side, and the march stopped the first night at a gymnasium. The Housing Now! people had their offices upstairs, a nice big office area and a big

meeting room, while downstairs we marchers had to vie for space on the floor to sleep. We had long, long waits to use the bathroom and shower.

I couldn't believe it. The same things we were angry about in the shelter system, we were experiencing on the march.

This fact did not go over well with the New York people, who were acting somewhat wild as compared to the tame people that the march organizers were used to from the shelters in Washington, DC. So one of the guys who was part of the leadership from CCNV and Housing Now! on the march gave us a speech. He was a big, fat, tall, light-skinned black man named Lonnie. I guess he thought he really had to put a hold on the people, tell them every little detail of how to behave, as if we had no sense. But we had walked all day long, partly through a tropical storm, and his attitude made us angry. I don't remember the words to the first part of his speech, but I remember those words did not go over well.

Terry stood up and shouted back to the guy "I am a man!" in a loud, strong, baritone voice that echoed through the gym.

I recall more clearly the next part of Lonnie's speech. He said something to this effect:

"I see there are women here. What we have to do is share and share alike. We have to make sure there's enough woman to go around for everybody. We should make sure that we all have our piece of woman."

"That's the most degrading thing I've heard in my entire life," Karen said to me.

Happily, Bob Brand, Jim Fike and a Miss Wells, all from the Welfare Rights group, showed up at the gym in a big school bus full of food and rain gear. That was fortunate because the remnants of Hurricane Hugo rained on us for several days more.

In Trenton we stayed at a Presbyterian church. A rally was held on our behalf, but in fact, the homeless people were not really a part of it, as all those who talked that day were politicians or establishment organizers.

A lot of people on the march did not care for the way we were being told what and how we were to do things and where

we were to march. At least 24 groups were represented on the march, among them the shelter homeless, the panhandling homeless, Tent City, and welfare organizations. A number of unaffiliated homeless people and supporters who simply wanted to be part of the movement eventually wound up marching with whatever group they felt comfortable with. Tent City got a lot of them.

As a result of the growing discontent of the marchers, Housing Now! and CCONV started having regular meetings with representatives from the various groups on the march to decide which routes to take and what needed to be taken care of. At one of these meetings we decided that any rallies we held in the towns would be organized collectively. But that didn't really happen. The march did become more of a joint effort, though the majority of the time we still ended up going the way Housing Now! wanted us to go. But at least we established a foothold in these very private meetings that the leaders of CCONV and Housing Now! were holding. That way we found out things a lot quicker, and sometimes found out things they did not want us to know.

On Friday, September 22nd, our "leaders" took us to Wolf School in Eastwick, south of Philadelphia, to stay for two nights. Now the school officials evidently had no idea we were coming in the first place. A Mr. Ed Schwartz and company kicked us out the next morning, saying that some of our people had lice. What did they expect from people who had been homeless and marching on the roads and sleeping in the woods? When we asked if he could help us find an alternative place to stay, he said we had to find our own. They just kicked us out and left us to fend for ourselves.

It had been our understanding that Housing Now! had received a lot of donations for this march. Yet the rain gear they promised us turned out to be big black garbage bags we were supposed to wear, and the Housing Now! meals were not anything like the banquet they fed us at that meeting back in September. Meals on the march consisted for the most part of peanut butter and jelly or baloney sandwiches day after day.

Shoes they had promised and shoes they gave us—old worn-down shoes. We had people with sore, bloodied feet who could barely walk. Old Man John in particular was hurting. We had already had a few medical emergencies, yet the promised mobile medical team never appeared.

It got to the point where I was approached by one of my guys from Tent City.

"We don't need these people," he said. "We can get to Washington ourselves."

I phoned Leona Smith, president of the National Union of the Homeless, to let her know what was going down and told her Tent City was going to Washington whether anybody helped us or not.

"Fuck Housing Now!!" I told her. "We're tired of these folks. We can't deal with them. We can get to Washington on our own, do our *own* march."

"Cas, you've got to hang with the people," Leona told me. "When you get to Washington, you've got to be there with all the people you started out with from New York."

Leona and the Union of the Homeless came to the rescue, letting the Tent City marchers stay at Dignity Housing in Philadelphia. So I was able to convince Tent City to hang on and keep with the big group. If we split up then, we would have lost track of our intent. We had left New York together and we were supposed to get to Washington together. By hook or by crook.

The next day after booting homeless people out of the school, the hypocrites of Philadelphia had the nerve to put on a big public display of so-called support for the homeless. They had a group of dignitaries up on a stage platform, including Ed Schwartz, the man who had put us out of the school. These people were taking turns speaking about wonderful wonderful things they were doing. Unfortunately for them, they also had me on that platform, and they had me speak.

"What the hell are we doing praising this dude?" I asked the audience, pointing at Schwartz. "He just threw you out on the streets!"

The dignitaries sat dumbfounded, while the audience roared its agreement.

Union of the Homeless gave Tent City \$300 for the march. Now Thomas was like our quartermaster on the march. He took care of the cigarettes. I took care of the money, however, because though Thomas was cool, he was under the influence of his buddies, such as Old Man John, who was an instigating type. If Thomas had held the money and they had talked to him about buying some booze, eventually they would have conned him into getting some. So I held onto the money and made sure it was spent for things we had to have to make it through the march.

By that time we needed a break to regroup, so when Leona handed us that money we decided that Tent City and the marchers hanging with us would go have a good breakfast the next day. The next morning about 17 of us went to a restaurant and had a humongous breakfast. We sat down at several tables and we ate, we talked, we were family. When we were done, we bought a few cartons of cigarettes and got back on the road. There we had good news: Lonnie, the dude who had made the derogatory speech at the gym that first night, got fired by the higher-ups. In reality, they had no choice—the man had continued to aggravate people, so that everybody was ready to kick his butt. I was so happy when we got word of his firing. We marched on to Chester, just outside of Philadelphia. Fortunately, the town of Chester came to our rescue and treated us well.

We marched on, down along Interstate Highway 95.

We needed medical services all along the way, but did not have them. One person got hit by a car. Others had seizures and asthma attacks. A woman began having pains in her chest and couldn't breathe. The man in charge did not believe anything was wrong with her, so he kept having her walk instead of ride. When she finally passed out, the people ganged up on him, and we came close to having a riot. The man almost got himself lynched.

Despite the fact that the promised medical support still failed to materialize, the determination of the people to get to Washington was phenomenal. Old Man John's feet were in bad

shape, but you could not stop him from marching. It was too important for him. He had to go.

A number of people detoxed on the march; I was one of them. When you are kicking alcohol or drugs, something inside your body is coming out, an internalized pain. When you are withdrawing, sometimes it is almost like an epileptic seizure. You are foaming and getting out the poisons. Every day I was on the road, walking, walking, walking, walking, sweating the alcohol out. The sun helped.

Things got so bad regarding living arrangements for the marchers that a Housing Now! man came to the Tent City group. He was a heavyset white dude with long brown hair in a pony tail. He asked us if we would teach the rest of the marchers bivouac; in other words, how to live and cook in the streets or in the woods. Yet when we had first started the march, they had told us they were going to be the ones to find us places to sleep out of the weather. Here they were admitting they were not able to fulfill that duty.

We were willing to do the teaching, but one day not long after we left Philadelphia, an organization out of Berkeley, called Seeds of Peace, showed up with a couple of buses. They had heard about the march and decided to become part of it. Seeds of Peace was a tremendously helpful group. If it had not been for them, we would really have been in a lot of trouble. One bus carried medical supplies and a lot of our gear, and the other carried food. They brought four or five portable toilets. They did the best they could with regard to supplying marchers with first aid and medical services. Seeds of Peace volunteers also went ahead of us into some of the towns and found accommodations for us. Had it not been for them, in a lot of the towns we would not have had a place to sleep.

After the march I heard from the Seeds of Peace folks who dealt with the marchers' medical needs that five women had miscarriages along the way. Most of the hospitals along the march did not want anything to do with homeless people. In the minds of so many people, too many people, we were already proven guilty of various crimes just by the fact that we were

homeless people. Each woman who miscarried had the option to return to New York. That was made available by Housing Now! But these women all continued the march. I think in all, only four people went back to New York before the march was completed.

Somehow Old Man John got hold of his disability check while on the march. Evidently, we passed near a town where his sister lived. He went to see her and came back with several fifths of vodka and whisky, which he began passing around to the Tent City guys. There I was kicking, and the rest of them were drinking up a storm. But I guess Old Man John's feet didn't hurt as much then. Though tempted like hell, I resisted taking a drink.

One of our purposes on that march was to go through the hearts of cities and towns and talk to and recruit other poor people and supporters and take them with us on the march, similar to Martin Luther King's march, similar to the WWI veterans' Bonus March on Washington. Every place we went we were supposed to pick up more and more people. Our goal was to focus the attention of the media and the citizens on the plight of the homeless by filling the streets, getting arrested, and attracting more and more marchers. Although the media were waiting for us to come through the cities, in most cases we did not march through the centers of towns. Instead, the Housing Now! organizers collaborated with the police and detoured us to the outskirts of towns, as if we were ashamed of what we were doing. As a result, we did not make the splash we were supposed to make. By detouring us, they made sure that some cities did not even know we had been there, and thus a lot of local and national media coverage that should have come was lost.

Sarah Ferguson was with us, covering the march for the *Village Voice*. I knew her already from talking to her in Tompkins Square Park, and I knew she had written a good article about the police riots in 1988 for a magazine called *Mother Jones*. However, a lot of the marchers did not like her around; they were suspicious of her because she was media. Sometimes people like her who are good-hearted, nevertheless don't understand homeless people, and so they say the wrong things without meaning to. Sometimes the questions Sarah asked made people

angry. I kept thinking "Nobody understands her." She came to me one time.

"Oh, man, why does everybody hate me?" she asked. "How come they don't like me? Why don't they want me here?"

I tried to explain things to her, but rather than coach her, I felt I had to let her experience the march. Those of us from Tent City who were familiar with her convinced the other marchers to leave her alone, to let her be with us, because the issue was getting the news of the march covered. As I said, because of Housing Now! constantly detouring us, the other newspapers and tv stations were many times not able to find us. As it turned out, however, the article that finally got printed in the *Village Voice*, written by James Ridgeway along with Sarah Ferguson, while favorable to the homeless, told nothing about our struggles on the march itself.

In some towns that we did go through, we experienced hostility, what I would call "shunning," when even just one or two of us would go into a store to buy a soda or some food. Sometimes people yelled at us as we marched past. It was not a racial issue either. Even when walking through black neighborhoods, black people would shout "Homeless people go away!" It was a class issue.

Near Edgewood, the march controllers planned to put us up at a U.S. Army base. Here I must give credit to Karen because in the beginning I was all for going to the gymnasium on the base. But as we started onto the base, Karen refused to go.

"Come on, Karen," I said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not going in there."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to go to prison, and as far as I'm concerned, that's what this base is for us."

If I had paid attention, I would have figured that out myself. Instead, I got on one of the buses, and they started driving us to the base gym. Karen stayed out front, outside the gates.

It was not until we were driving through the base that I saw the setup, all the armed soldiers in the area. Then when we got to the gym and I saw where we would be sleeping, the

overcrowding, hundreds of people stepping over each other, the possibility of fights, I realized what was happening.

If anything happened, we were trapped.

"I've decided I'm not going to stay here," I told the people from Tent City. I explained my reasons. "Anybody else that doesn't want to stay here, come with me. We'll find someplace else to crash."

A Boston crew that was on the march also decided to leave with us. So we got back on the bus and left. We told the march coordinators where we were headed, so they could pick us up the next morning.

Outside the army base we met up with Karen and walked to a picnic area. We figured to pitch our tents and camp there. Then the local police showed up.

"If you folks don't leave this park, we're going to have to arrest you," they said.

"Well, you're going to have to arrest us, then," I said. "Because we're not going anywhere."

"Maybe we can find a farmer who'll let us camp on his land." It was one of the white boys from Boston.

He and his girlfriend went to a farm a good distance off the march route, down the road from the picnic grounds, and convinced a man to let us sleep in his hay field. So we didn't go to jail that day.

We hiked out to the farm and pitched our tents in a hay field. By then Karen and I were staying together in one of the tents by ourselves. It felt like a regular camping trip. We got to know the Boston guys a little that night. We would not stay together with them during the rest of the march, but this episode we shared gave us a good feeling.

Later, after everyone was sleeping, I looked outside our tent and saw the big full moon. To me this was better than being cooped up in another damn gymnasium. Out here we didn't have to worry about anybody stepping on us. Out here it was quiet and calm, except for the crickets and grasshoppers.

Next day, had it not been for the Tent City crew who did stay in the gym, the leaders of the march would have left us behind.

Larry McGill especially wanted to take off without us. McGill was involved with the shelter system homeless. He ran an organization whose existence mostly came out of panhandling. Neither he nor the other leaders wanted to come get us, but the other marchers forced them to. They sent a van to come get us and take us to the place where we were starting the march that day.

By that point in the march, about 30 other people had decided to march with Tent City. People were leaving their organizations and marching with us. Among them was one man with a huge snake and another who brought a pit bull on the march.

Along the road to Washington, the reception of the people who *were* expecting us was tremendous. By September 26, we ended up in Wilmington, Delaware. It was so inspiring. The mayor was there, and the dude from the district league. No matter how many times I spoke at press meetings, I always spoke about how it was time for the homeless to talk. No matter where I went in Wilmington, I found people there already feeling this prior to my saying it. The town named September 26 as National Homeless Day in memory of this day. After all the misery of the march, this told us that people were still hearing us and still listening.

The following Sunday we made it to Baltimore, where the homeless organizations, homeless people, welfare mothers, and other well-wishers met us at the college gymnasium where we were staying. They brought us rain ponchos, and they brought sandwiches they had stayed up all night and day making, enough for all of the marchers to have two sandwiches apiece. They also brought plenty of soda.

Now this was the kind of support we had expected from the leaders of the march. It came instead from the people. I saw that if we could tap that same level of commitment and concern that these people in Baltimore were using to help us, if we could harness that same kind of enthusiasm and energy for the overall movement up and out of poverty, we would be winners. It can be done by poor people. Our energy, our ingenuity, our experiences,

our survival instincts are the resources that are going to get us over.

After three hard weeks on the road, we made it to Washington. We were very hyped up because even though we had detoured all the way through the march, we still got to Washington. We arrived in the suburbs of the District of Columbia with about 260 to 275 people. We should have had anywhere from a thousand to two thousand people with us. Still, we were lucky.

That was a heavy day. When you first think of doing something like that, and you can't see to the end and then you finally get there...I felt very honored having had the privilege of marching from New York alongside the people I marched with.

On reaching the District of Columbia, we were given quarters in a big, tall, brand new office building. Since on the march I was the representative and speaker for the National Union of the Homeless and Tent City, I was told of a briefing with the Exodus March staff that was going to be held at the CCNV building in Washington. I went to this meeting with Willie Baptist, whom I had originally met at the Survival Summit back in July. He and I were the only two people from the march who attended the meeting. Karen came with us as we were driven into town.

The building that Mitch Snyder had gotten from President Reagan with a hunger strike and had turned into a shelter was humongous. Karen had come along because she was interested in seeing the building. Way before she knew me, she had been part of the effort to get CCNV that building. She wanted to see for herself what it was like.

It was a big, light-colored office building with lots of windows. Only four blocks from the United States Capitol Building, it was even more degrading than the shelters we had in New York. Twelve hundred people lived in there. All we got to see was the downstairs. It was clean, but overcrowded. People were sleeping in hallways. There was alcohol, there were drugs. At the time Karen was looking around, the actors Jon Voight and Martin Sheen were visiting down in the basement office. Both

those guys were close to Mitch Snyder. Later Sheen played the role of Mitch Snyder in a made-for-tv movie.

The Housing Now! and CCNV people had pizza and beer for us at the meeting. The fact that in their shelter they provided alcohol for us told me how sensitive they were about the alcoholism among the homeless. As the meeting started, Willie and I brought up how poorly they had provided what they had promised.

"If you had gotten everything that we promised you on that march," one of their representatives said, "you would not have gotten to Washington mad."

I was stunned.

"You gotta be crazy," I said. "We were on the march because we were mad. You had nothing to do with us getting to Washington."

I wanted to slap him upside the head. I wanted to knock him out. I am serious. That man's words told me that there really never was any intention to give us the proper gear and supplies. Even though I had suspected it, it shocked me that they would so casually admit they had been lying to us all along. No matter what, honesty would have been the best policy. Had they told us the truth ahead of time, we could have decided for ourselves whether or not we wanted to rough it that much. Had they been straight with us, it might have made us more comrades or brothers and sisters. How could they possibly figure that we had to be made miserable (and drained to the point of exhaustion) by the conditions of the march in order to display our anger?

What got us to Washington in the first place was our own real anger, our hatred of the system, not something tricked out of us by scheming advocates. At that moment I detested Housing Now! and the people who ran that march.

Tired, I went outside the building and sat at one of the picnic tables to smoke a cigarette.

Across the street I could see police gathered. They were there to prevent the homeless from getting in the park.

As I sat at the table, rats started coming up to me in broad daylight like your cat comes up to you wanting a snack or to be patted. I saw more rats than I care to remember.

Willie, Karen and I went back out to the office building in the suburbs where we were staying that first night. CCNV contacted the marchers there, saying that everybody was going to ride in the next day on the bus. That was a mistake. The purpose of the march was to dramatize homeless people's determination, and putting us all on buses would detract from that. Again I felt like they were undermining our efforts.

"Keep your fucking buses," I said. "We walked all the way from New York. We have no intention of riding a bus into Washington."

What we ended up doing was telling the kids and old people who wanted to, and those who could not make it, to go ahead and get on the bus. Karen looked at Old Man John, Old Man John looked at Karen. We all knew his feet were killing him. He didn't care. He was going with us all the way.

The next day, we marched in.

Because Washington, D.C. is the capital city of the United States, I expected it to be the best-looking city in the world. But it's just like day and night. Go to one part, it's fantastic, it's beautiful: the Capitol Building, the Jefferson Memorial, the reflecting pools, the lights. But then you go to another part of town, nearby, and you see the walls falling down, you see buildings burnt down, boarded up, people sleeping on sidewalks, at bus stops. I had not realized that poverty and homelessness were so prominent in Washington, the capital of the biggest democracy in the world. It overwhelmed me.

Donna Brazile, who was in charge of the Housing Now! part of the march, and the other controllers of the march, had first wanted us to stay at CCNV, but after the conditions we saw, we had no intention of staying there. Tent City and part of the Exodus crew intended to meet up with Leona Smith and the Union of the Homeless and have our own convention. So Donna Brazile and Mitch Snyder and the other march organizers told us they had made arrangements for us to use a campground where we could have our meetings and do our own thing. They led us to believe that we were going to get us a decent place for our Union of the Homeless convention.

We would have preferred to camp right in Lafayette Park, where the veterans of Hooverville camped, where Martin Luther King went, where all the big parades and marches and camps happened. In actuality, they put us out in the boondocks on the far side of the RFK Stadium parking lot, in the woods, where nobody would see us. Yet the whole point was to be seen and to be heard by people who normally would not look at us nor listen to us.

I felt we had been conned, and that fired my intention to follow through on the Union's original plan and take over the HUD building the day before the big rally. Leona, however, told me we were going to play it cool because a meeting had been arranged with the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Jack Kemp. Our meeting was scheduled for Friday, October the 6th, at the main HUD office. They said they would allow us half an hour.

Out where the Union of the Homeless, Tent City, Up and Out of Poverty, Welfare Rights and other grassroots organizations were bivouacked, the march organizers had big tents for everyone to congregate in. Tent City went off to the side, and we built our own separate area. There was a white shack out there that we believed, and which I believe to this day, housed the undercover cops who were keeping track of us. That's where the drugs and alcohol in the camp came from.

Friday came. The HUD building was a big curved federal office building. The words "Department of Housing and Urban Development" were in stainless steel letters on a big tall separate slab of concrete out front. Not the most compassionate-looking architecture. Some of us carried a banner that said "STOP THE WAR ON THE POOR AND HOMELESS OF THE WORLD." The heavysset sister I had first seen at the Survival Summit was leading the cheers again.

"What do we want?" she asked.

"HOUSING!"

"When do we want it?"

"NOW!"

Leona Smith was up front, the sun shining on her. She had on a cream-colored pants suit, with the sleeves shoved up to her elbows, and a dark, patterned blouse. She put her hand up to shield the sun from her eyes.

"Casanova, from Tent City," she called. "Casanova, come on through, brother. We're half an hour late, but that's okay. They've been keeping us waiting for far too long. We'll let them wait on us now."

I came on through the crowd to stand with Leona. I wore jeans and a heavy plaid lumberjack shirt. Leona raised her right hand as she talked to the people.

"We're going to go in, we're going to meet with Jack Kemp. We're going to present Jack Kemp with our resolutions that came from you, and the rest will be up to them."

With a gentle fist raised, she ended her talk. Hand in hand we walked to the entrance of the HUD building, hundreds of our supporters following us to the door chanting.

"We're going to take houses!"

"All night long!"

The riot guards let me, Leona, Alicia from Dignity Housing, a guy from Texas, and one guy from California into the HUD building. We waved back at our friends, smiling, because it was invigorating to have all those supporters, but as we went in past the police, some of them African-American, with their riot gear, visored helmets, and dark sunglasses, I felt scared and worried.

They locked the doors behind us.

They took us upstairs into a large, secluded meeting room. As we sat down around a very big conference table, I was very very upset, I was very very uptight, I was very very agitated because of the position we were being put into. Had the meeting been arranged in a more visible, open area, maybe I would have felt more comfortable. But we were in their territory, and they were heavily armed.

Jack Kemp introduced himself. I already had an impression of Jack Kemp before I went up there, and in those days I wasn't pulling my punches.

"The times for beating around the bush are all over," I said. "I don't trust you. And I don't like you, understand? You guys are in charge of people's lives, but as far as I am concerned, you politicians are a corrupt crew. I'm an artist and I'm getting ready to do a painting of you. I have a vision of you as a very nice thief, good-looking but weak."

I got to admit, Kemp kept his cool. He hoped to change my opinion. He talked a little bit about his football career, and I talked about my homeless career and Tent City. It went around the table, everybody introducing themselves and their issues. Barry Zigas was there. He was the one of the top march coordinators and president of the advocacy group called the National Low-Income Housing Coalition. Robert Hayes, the guy who ran the Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, was also there.

Gradually, as Kemp started talking and we started talking, we began to get a little more comfortable. Everybody expressed their opinions about the situation of homelessness and poverty, and how they felt about it, in detail and very graphically. I talked about the reasons people had brought the fighting to the capital, namely, the sorry conditions in the shelter system, the availability of houses all over the U.S. that are vacant and boarded up.

Kemp had a friendly manner. He listened to us, and then he started saying the things that we wanted to hear.

"We're going to start a program called Project Hope," he said, "so we can get homeless people into housing."

He then told us about a three-phase program of helping people move from short-term, or transitional housing to permanent housing. He said 10 per cent of HUD housing would go to the homeless, to be rehabbed by and for the homeless.

Halfway through the negotiations, a call came from downstairs saying that the homeless were trying to chain themselves to the doors and break the doors down. The people were restless. They had not marched for three weeks to just stand around and do nothing. Leona made a decision to go down and talk to our supporters and cool them off a little because we felt that we were accomplishing something up here.

From the moment she walked out that door, I was worried all over again. The moment she left our sight and she was not with us, I felt that the authorities could snatch her at any time—while she was going down there, or on her way back upstairs from talking. That kind of threat was there from the beginning of the march, all the way. There was always the possibility of the establishment arresting us. Personally I believed we were not going to accomplish anything if we tried to do it all at meetings or all in the streets. A combination of both was necessary. But I was praying that nobody downstairs did anything to get shot.

Finally Leona came back, having convinced our people outside to give us a chance to see what we could get done with HUD. I felt relief.

Gradually, as the negotiations continued, I was getting to like Mr. Jack Kemp. We talked about the program where for one dollar you can buy a building. I thought that was a good idea because anybody can come up with a dollar. Even I would panhandle under that condition. But the implications of what you are getting into are not announced when they say "A Dollar A Building!" When you buy that building, we realized later, you have to rehab it within a certain amount of time or lose it. *U.S. News and World Report* estimated that it takes \$65,000 to \$70,000 to gut and rehab one apartment in a vacant building.

At last Mr. Kemp handed us a piece of paper with his commitments and promises. I felt it was like a treaty. Kemp's letter committed HUD and the George Bush Administration to "make available" to the homeless 10 per cent of the government-owned, single-family "affordable" houses, or about 5,000 houses, in 1990.

Next, the letter committed the administration to seek to "reorient our voucher and certificate programs to assist those most in need to become self-sufficient" and to "review specific proposals to expand the Dignity Housing model and to try to adapt such new housing initiatives as Operation Bootstrap to make this possible."

I liked the idea of helping people become self-sufficient. The government gives out AFDC, they give out welfare, but with that

money they pay out they don't accomplish anything that lasts. Sure, you can give somebody their rent money, let them pay their rent and buy their food, but if that's all you're doing, then you're not really doing anything. There has to be training involved, and an interest in the individual, not just paperwork.

Kemp also made a promise that "representatives of HUD and representatives of homeless and low-income people will meet in October to begin to review specific proposals to use HUD funding and property to help the homeless."

Not mentioned in the letter were Kemp's implications that these meetings would happen on a regular basis and that HUD was going to pay us money as consultants at these meetings, as well as arrange for us to have transportation and housing during these trips to Washington. It only seemed right. We homeless and grassroots organizations did not have the kind of money to be making several trips a year to Washington, no matter how important it was. By definition we were poor, so traveling expenses were hard to come by. Government money is our money anyhow. Even the homeless pay taxes when they buy a bottle of wine or a pack of cigarettes. We have been paying taxes all our lives; our families have been paying taxes.

The key point was that none of the meetings, which would take place at least once a year, were supposed to take place without homeless people being represented. I would soon learn that Kemp's idea of homeless representation was different from my own.

Kemp's letter also stated that the Bush Administration "will propose changes in the use of CDBG funds so that they will be used to fight poverty, increase self-sufficiency and opportunity in low-income communities and expand and preserve affordable, decent housing for low-income people."

Tent City was the only organization there that did not ask for government funding. I was in agreement with Malcolm X, who said, "I'm for whatever gets results. I don't go for any organization...that has to compromise with the power structure and has to rely on certain elements within the power structure for their financing, which puts them in a position to be influenced

and controlled all over again by the power structure itself." That was my whole gripe with the march organizers.

But Tent City did not go to Washington with a selfish attitude. We were there in support of the other organizations who had people with families and children and who needed government-funded housing. The families that were part of this movement went for the grants because they needed them. The only thing Tent City actually asked the government was to give up some of the abandoned buildings they owned in the name of the American people. We who marched to Washington were American people.

Who could disagree with this statement: "We must turn the abandoned homes throughout our cities and towns into decent, affordable homes for the homeless and low-income people..."? The only problem was that the Secretary of HUD added "I pledge to work directly and aggressively with state and local governments to make this happen." We asked Secretary Kemp, why don't you let *us* rehab those buildings ourselves? In fact, one of the things that Kemp told us he would do was hire the homeless to rehab housing owned by the government and then let them move in. Technical services and advice would come from Washington. Unfortunately, he didn't put that in the letter in as much detail as he said it to us.

"I pledge," Secretary Kemp wrote in the letter, "to work directly with individuals and groups throughout the country to assure that HUD's programs, properties and funds are used to expand opportunities for low-income people and help make decent, affordable housing a reality for all and to make it possible for all homeless men, women and their children and their families to live in a decent home."

Amen.

Our scheduled 30-minute meeting ended up as a three-hour meeting, plus lunch. When all was said and done, we came downstairs with this letter of commitment, and I felt real proud. All of us who had been at that meeting felt that we had accomplished what we came for. This was something we could take home to our people. We wanted to believe what was said in that paper, and so

we did believe it. We wanted to believe in Kemp's letter. I stood on a brick planter and read the letter to everybody who had waited, while other people were getting copies made.

But out of all these people, one woman from California, named Dorothy, was not happy with the letter. She pulled me to one side.

"You know, that letter don't really mean anything," she said. "It don't mean shit."

I should have paid attention to her.

While we had been at HUD, a rumor was apparently going around camp that somebody had found some kind of paper telling how much money CCNV and Housing Now! had, and about how much we had been lied to and conned. Feeling duped, a lot of the people from the New Exodus March went over to the CCNV. The Exodus people were voicing their opinions on this, trying to get in to talk to Mr. Mitch Snyder himself. It got to the point where CCNV called out their own security. A riot broke out. A couple of Exodus women got injured and went to the hospital.

The following day, Saturday, October 7th, we marched into Washington for the main event. It felt good to be there, to see all the people getting together to confront homelessness and poverty. I understand that while we had been marching down from the north, another group had also been marching from the south; they had started from Atlanta. Besides Tent City, a lot of organizations were represented that day, such as the Urban League, the YMCA, the United States Conference of Mayors, Greenpeace, SANE, the Gray Panthers, striking Eastern Airlines pilots, the AFL-CIO, the U.S. Catholic Conference, PTA members, and the National Organization for Women. *People* magazine reported that there were 40,000 people gathered in Washington the day of the rally.

The *Village Voice* estimated at least 100,000. Housing Now! said it was more like 150,000.

The sun was out and there was enough wind so that the banners of "BUILD HOUSES NOT BOMBS," "EVERY HUMAN BEING DESERVES A HOME," and "HOMELESS, NOT HELPLESS" rippled and flapped as we headed east on Constitution Avenue toward the bright white Capitol Building.

"No housing, no peace!" people were chanting.

Again the cops wanted us to stay on the sidewalks, but this time we walked through the streets. Our multitudes took up the streets. A spirited young African-American sister linked her arms with other marchers who linked their arms.

"Let's take it in," she shouted, "'Cause we're fired up! Let's bring it in!"

"We ain't takin' it no more!" her companions shouted.

"'Cause we're fired up!"

When we got to the rally, the reception was tremendous.

"There's Tent City!"

"Tent City!"

"Tent City!"

"Tent City!"

"No housing, no peace!"

At the rally site, a lot of tourists came mainly to see the stars. In fact, Housing Now! had put on a \$150 a ticket dinner to raise money for themselves. The way they got people to pay this was to advertise that they would have 250 movie and tv stars at the dinner. So that is why I say I felt a lot of the non-homeless in the audience were primarily interested in seeing celebrities rather than helping homeless people. Jesse Jackson and Coretta Scott King were there, and Sugar Ray Leonard. I saw Mrs. King and wanted to go speak to her, but it felt like she was part of all the show business. They also had Geraldo Rivera and all these movie stars and people introduced by movie stars, talking about the homeless fight.

I wondered how the hell somebody with a million-dollar house could talk about being a homeless person? They didn't know what we needed.

The actors and stars were well-intentioned, but they were misinformed. They thought they were helping us. They weren't doing anything for us. The money was going to Housing Now!, which meant CCNV.

"If it hadn't been for Mitch Snyder and God," one speaker said, "the march wouldn't have been, it wouldn't have existed."

Even before we got to Washington, many of us realized that Housing Now! and CCNV were using us. We waited for the opportunity to have our say. But as the parade of celebrities continued, we realized they had no intention of letting us speak.

Well, we had marched all the way to Washington, not to listen to movie star politicians, but to speak out ourselves, to make it plain that homeless people and people of poverty were taking their own initiative.

The Anti-Hunger Coalition, led by Serena Martin, Diane Johnson and Diane Bernard, began pushing their way to the front. The women didn't think about all the whys and why-nots. All they said was "They're not going to let us talk. Fuck it, let's take it in. We need houses, we need homes, we need food." They led, and I followed.

In the background you could hear the homeless people.

"The homeless have no tvs. Let the homeless speak! Tv later, housing now!"

A lot of the Tent City crew, other marchers, and the Welfare Rights group were bellied up against the wooden picket security fence that was about 20 feet out front of the stage.

"Let the homeless speak!" they shouted. "Poverty pimps! Homeless people can speak for themselves!"

The security men behind the fence wearing blue shirts, white caps, and slacks were looking nervous. Organizers on the stage were looking down at us, shaking their heads and wagging their fingers.

Leona had made it backstage. Karen and I were at the gate that led to the stage. I saw Coretta King back there.

"They ought to let us go through the gate," Karen said. "That's why we're here, to speak."

Karen wanted me to go onto the stage. I was ready to just let it go, but a security dude, a big dark-skinned brother, started getting rough with her, started pushing her. So I got over there quick and angry and let that brother know who we were and why we were there.

Serena and the women of the Anti-Hunger Coalition were watching the confrontation I was having with security. The mood had already gotten ugly. The potential for a riot had already existed because the organizers were not allowing the marchers to get up and speak. We had not walked all the way to Washington to shut up and watch and listen to someone else. And now the security guys were compounding the crowd's anger by pushing Karen around. Fortunately, someone behind the stage knew who I was and told the man to let me in.

"We want Leona!" the crowd shouted.

Had they not let Leona Smith speak, I believe we would have torn down that fence and the stage. As it was, Leona was escorted to the lectern to cheers.

"What do we want?" she said.

"HOUSING!"

"When do we want it?"

"NOW!"

Leona looked out over all those faces.

"The struggle is not over, my brothers and sisters," she said. "Until every single homeless man, woman, and child in America have a right to decent, affordable housing, and a right to a decent quality of life. It does not stop. It does not stop."

They cheered her because they knew she was one of them and spoke what they felt. They finally convinced the organizers that I should get up there and speak too. As the pretty white woman introduced me, I felt nervous. To some extent I was overwhelmed by looking out and seeing thousands and thousands of people. It was the most people I had ever faced. But I looked for and saw the yellow and white New Exodus hats, and then I wasn't speaking to the movie stars or the tv stars or the tourists. I appreciated all the other people being there, but they could have no concept of what the homeless who had made that march were

feeling, why we were there. I wasn't talking to them; I was speaking to the people who actually walked the New Exodus March.

"Hey," I said. "We made it, huh? We finally made it. I also want you to remember that no matter what anybody says, you guys have got to pat yourselves on the back. Realize what you have done. You walked all these miles. You went through all these trials and tribulations. So you can be heard. You made this rally. You made everything that is happening this day happen. If it were not for you, there wouldn't be a movement. Don't let these advocates make you feel that they have done anything because if it weren't for you there would be no advocates.

"I'm here to say that we, the homeless of New York, can no longer let other people or the so-called higher powers talk for us. We, the homeless, the people living below the poverty level, must talk for ourselves. It is our duty, it's our job, to go back and keep this fight going, no matter what anybody tells you. Keep it going!"

I never have and still don't consider myself a *victim* of society, except in the sense that I believe there is oppression of the poor. Let me amend that: I consider that I was a victim as long as I accepted my condition, my plight. None of us was accepting our plight that day. Standing up there seeing all those thousands and thousands of people who had come together, I felt that we were not going to come out on the bottom of the totem pole this time.

CHAPTER 17

The ABCs of Politics

As I have said, I never had any intentions of becoming a political activist. I had been a pacifist all my life in that I had accepted the government-supported segregation of the homeless and poor people. But once the avenue of activism became clear, there has been no stopping me.

My life experience leads me to get intense in the struggle. I get really upset, not only with the poverty pimps, but also with the homeless people who don't realize that they need to act. We, the homeless and formerly homeless, have to be the ones who run the shelters, the homes, the soup kitchens, the welfare—anything that deals with people in need. But this will be a struggle because there is no way the poverty pimps are going to give up the shelter system as it is now, and the welfare system as it is now. Some shelters get paid federal money for each individual they have staying there. They don't *want* anybody to become independent because the homeless have become a billion-dollar industry.

After the march on Washington was over, everybody went back home on buses, except for me and Karen. She was determined that she would get to her senator's office to speak on behalf of her son. I wanted to hold onto the atmosphere of the march, and maybe see some of the repercussions.

We tried to get hold of John Danforth, one of the senators from Missouri, because Missouri was the state where Karen's parents were living and had Ethan. We talked to one of Senator Danforth's aides, who took notes.

"We'll certainly pass this on to the senator," said the aide, but we never heard back from the senator.

Back home in New York, the struggle continued. Although we had the letter from Mr. Kemp and HUD, we now had to make that letter work for us. Throughout the country, people were trying to get their ten percent from HUD. We were supposed to

have a meeting with Kemp in October. But every time we got a meeting set up, he disappeared. He did it very well. He is a professional—give him credit for that. At the HUD meeting all he had done was pacify us for the moment because there were a thousand people at his door. It would soon turn out that the letter was not worth the value of toilet paper.

Public School 105 was an old four-story brick school at 269 East 4th. It had been an abandoned building for about ten years and had degenerated to the point that by the fall of 1989 it was a shooting gallery. The squatters we knew moved into the building, chased out all the junkies and cleaned out all the old sets of works and thousands of needles. Then they moved in and called themselves the "ABC Community." The city even let them know that the building was at that time zoned for housing.

In those days I was staying some nights with Karen at her apartment, which was on 12th Street, right around the corner from Tompkins Square. At her place I could take a bath and sleep in a bed. Come morning, I would head out to the park and then to ABC. As far as I was concerned, I was still homeless because if Karen and I broke up, I would be back on the street.

"But Cas, you can stay here," Karen said.

"It's not mine." I said. "Mine says 'Casanova' on the lease. Mine says I pay the rent. Mine, mine, mine. I don't want yours. I love you, but I want mine. That's why I'm in the streets."

But some people in the park got after me for staying with Karen, accusing me of copping out.

"If you are angry with me because I have a woman who has an apartment," I told them, "you need to think. Why are we in this fight? I'm in it so I can get off the streets. I'm not fighting to live in Tompkins Square the rest of my life. I go stay with her because I'm fighting to have a sense of stability, a relationship, a home, a decent way of life, and that's what I'm getting with Karen. That's what we're trying to do: get out of the fucking park!"

At the invitation of the squatters, some of the Tent City people came to move into ABC. This was a good strategy because the neighborhood around the school was black and Puerto Rican, and with Tent City there, you didn't just have white squatters in the building, you also had blacks and Puerto Ricans. At first we had a problem, though, because the people at the school wanted everybody in the school, and the people at the park wanted everybody in the park. It was ridiculous. Wherever I talked, I tried to emphasize the need for both factions to stay united.

So some of us went in with the squatters and proceeded to start setting up living quarters and a community center. The old school was a big building and it would hold a lot of people. We had an influx of people helping with renovating the building and getting the program going.

We didn't get any money from the city or state or federal government to do this work. It was a grassroots project. Emmaus Haus brought food. The White Lung Association (which deals with asbestos-related lung disease) collected money for us; so did the Democratic Clubs. I and a few others from Tent City had speaking engagements, and we would get some money for that.

One of our supporters, David Green, a teacher at a young adult education school in Harlem, more or less got me started speaking at different places. He had me speak to his students. I did a lot of the talking for Tent City because I was getting warmed up to being a public speaker at that point. My first real public speaking had been in the park at the Squatters' Rights Festival back in the summer. During the elections I was asked to speak at a Democratic Club that was working to get Dinkins elected mayor. I spoke at a high school down in Englewood, New Jersey. I spoke to the School of Social Welfare or Social Workers, I forget exactly. I even ended up going to speak at the Columbia School of Medicine. Each of these speaking engagements was arranged by people who were not homeless, but who were supporters of Tent City. Every now and then I would get an honorarium, but all proceeds went to Tent City, to help what was now an organization associated with the ABC Community. ABC was also getting money from neighborhood boosters and the Law

Students Anti-Poverty Project. They were helping us fix up the building, make the office spaces, put in new walls.

The police knew we were there. They used to watch us come down and fill up our buckets at the fire hydrant and carry them back in. They watched us renovating that building with our own manpower and did nothing to stop us. We had our own plumbers working on fixing the water and carpenters doing repairs and renovation. We had homeless people or squatters who were electricians rigging up the electricity.

You walked in the front door of the ABC Center and that was the place we turned into an office for social services. We invited different organizations that were going in their own directions to have an office in our building. We had a group from Homeward Bound who wanted to open up an office. Not only did we set up a filtering system of getting people off the street and into ABC, we were also getting ready to teach about AIDS and drug and alcohol abuse. Soon the community center opened another office with a phone and a person who worked throughout the community helping the homeless. On the ground floor there were about ten different office spaces. Interested organizations were vying for space. What we intended to do was to put them all in one huge office and share their resources.

Some of the people in Sabotage, the anarchist group, were teachers, and they started teaching reading and G.E.D. classes on the second floor. We found a doctor who was willing to open up a clinic in the school. She wanted to come and open up a clinic and help get a staff going. We wanted to open an art center because a lot of us in Tent City were artists. We planned to let people come there and display and sell their art. One woman who was an artist wanted to open up not only an art studio, but also an art school.

The next flight up was the residence area. That floor was our floor, for the people living there. We had a big communal kitchen.

Our community center was open to people in the neighborhood. On the top floor was a gymnasium. We tore down some walls and made it an even bigger space. That was going to

be turned into our community recreation center. We were going to have a karate class for self-defense. A band called Mass Transit was scheduled to play a benefit for us there. Sometimes at night you would hear neighborhood bands practicing up there.

Those were exciting weeks to me. We had a community growing at P.S. 105. We were getting people out of the parks and off the streets. Pretty much every other night we met to talk over how things were going. We were becoming self-sufficient, and we were being accepted by the community. Not everybody in the neighborhood loved us, but we had the majority on our side.

What remained was for the city to give us the building legally. We didn't want money; we wanted to get started helping people. I liked the squatters' strategy because they went right in doing something that needed to be done. On the other hand, I didn't want to be worrying about the police coming to my roof or coming in my basement to throw me out any time they wanted to. I wanted a piece of paper saying this belongs legally to Casanova or to the Tent City Union of the Homeless or the ABC Community. I didn't want to be a squatter, I wanted to be an owner. All of us want our own things, all of us.

We intended to set up the ABC Community to deal with the issues of housing and tenant rights, but most importantly, with the issue of poverty itself because poverty relates to all the other causes of homelessness: drugs, alcohol, little or no education or job training, no family.

This frightened the city. Make no mistake, the folks in charge did not want us doing things for ourselves, did not like the fact that poor people could do things on their own. In the minds of the bureaucrats, that set a dangerous precedent.

If once we could get legal control of P.S. 105, then we could consolidate and continue to branch out. And this strategy would spread. Instead of being puppets of Donald Trump and the real estate tycoons, and the landlords, we would be our own landlords. Now you might think that would make the city government happy because we would save them the social services money. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats didn't see it that way. Instead, they

cried out that homeless people were criminals for taking a neglected public building and making it work for the public.

Welfare pays the rent for a lot of bureaucrats. Our independence would hurt the poverty pimps in city government and in the shelter system because then they would no longer get as much social welfare income from the Federal government. Every time the rich and powerful throw somebody out of a building and tear it down, the price of real estate goes up. To the tycoons and landlords, our success would mean there was property they couldn't charge outrageous prices for. To the city it would mean they wouldn't get that bonanza of real estate tax dollars.

To tell the truth, I think that the squatters might have been left alone a lot longer had they not invited Tent City to move in with them. The cops knew us—we had a long-term battle going on.

First the city started sending people from the Housing Department to say that we could not stay there and that they would find us other housing. The establishment tried to pacify us with a program aimed at getting people out of the park. City Councilwoman Miriam Friedlander made a lot of promises to us, first at Karen's apartment, and then at a meeting in the school.

Friedlander promised us that we wouldn't have to deal with any shelters. That had been her say ever since she got involved with the homeless situation: "No shelters. No shelters. No shelters." And I agreed, because if you take people out of the park and put them in a shelter, all you're doing then is pulling them out of one graveyard and throwing them into another. I emphasize that because Tompkins Square Park literally used to be a cemetery at one time long ago.

Unfortunately, Friedlander was the type of person who always got very vocal to people and the press about the need for housing, but no progress was ever made. This was the way I felt about her, but people told me to leave her alone. So I left her alone.

By this time, Tent City had become the New York Tent City Union of the Homeless, and I was president. The Philadelphia-

based National Union of the Homeless would contact me either through David Green or Shigemi, who both had telephones. Sometimes I would also get calls at Karen's place.

When I wasn't staying with Karen, I stayed in the back area of the rec room on the top floor of ABC. As president of the Tent City Union of the Homeless, I had a room to myself. My bedroom had once been a room used for storage. In the big room next to mine four people had sleeping bags. We had plans for making rooms so couples could have privacy.

Karen was great. She brought a bed to ABC. She also came up with an electric heater. Before that, the only heat we had was in the kitchen, where we cooked in a barrel. That's where we watched tv, mostly football and basketball.

One day I read an article in the *New York Times* which indicated Kemp, Mitch Snyder and Barry Zigas had been holding meetings with no homeless people there. Barry Zigas was supposed to be mediating this thing for us.

I phoned HUD in Washington immediately.

"Just like we spread the news of this letter with all the commitments and all the promises," I told them, "just like we were able to do that, we're going to spread the news that you're renegeing on everything, that you're not keeping appointments with us, that, if fact, you are doing things behind our backs, and totally disrespecting homeless people again."

Half an hour later I got a call from HUD. The meeting was on.

Many of us who arrived in Washington for the meeting (Union of the Homeless paid my way) were the original people who had met with Kemp in early October. We were expecting to meet with Kemp again.

A man came through the door and said his name was Ron Rosenfield. He was the financial director of low-income housing at HUD in Washington.

"You're not coming in here and changing any rules," he said quickly. "What we say goes."

Rosenfield acted as though he felt that it was beneath him even to be in the same room with us. I raised bloody hell right

then and showed him the newspaper stories. He said this was politics. He said something along the lines of "You have to learn the language. When immigrants come to the United States, they know that they have to speak English. Well, you're in Washington, now."

They've got a language of their own there, I guess.

We had an agenda we wanted to talk about. But Rosenfield only wanted to talk about the ten percent Kemp had said he would give us because Rosenfield was from the financial department, and he didn't want to talk about anything else. We said that we were there not only to discuss housing, but everything pertaining to the poverty level because there are interconnections.

"HUD is in the insurance business," he told us. "We are in the business of making money."

After several more unproductive minutes, Mr. Rosenfield stood up and ended the meeting. He walked out of the room talking about how he had to go home and put his feet up on the couch and relax.

We had been naive, and Kemp had tricked us by addressing the letter to "Housing Now," leaving him an out on a technicality, letting him only deal with the status quo homeless advocate groups.

Tricking is the same thing as lying.

Mr. Kemp, with all his smarts, knew what he was doing when he addressed the letter "Dear Housing Now." At the meeting he led us to believe the things in that letter were negotiable with the homeless, but when Kemp wrote "Dear Housing Now," that said right then and there, Housing Now! and nobody else. That meant the exclusion of the Union of the Homeless, the Anti-Poverty Organization, and all the grassroots groups and individuals. That was his way out.

Know your enemy. Any time you stop fighting your enemy simply because he says things that sound like what you want to hear, you are making a mistake. You have got to pay attention to exactly how he says it.

Looking back, I believe CCNV, Housing Now! and Coalition for the Homeless were all in line, all together on the issue. The advocates used that march to say to the media, "See, we are helping the homeless people, the homeless accept us as their leaders, the homeless people obey us."

And what did we obedient homeless get for our acceptance of the advocates? Stories of Donna Brazile going to Africa using money made from the march. That's why I hate the word "advocate." That's why we call advocates "poverty pimps." Many people in the world think these organizations are God's gift to the homeless, but, in reality, too many of these organizations are doing little but ripping us off.

Looking back, I think we should have insisted that the letter read "Dear Homeless of America" or something more open like that. If we had been on top of things, we would have had Kemp address that letter differently. But at the time we were so glad to get a letter we didn't pay enough attention.

Nevertheless, the letter was important as a morale booster, a good thing to take home to the people. Homeless people all over the United States then had ammunition they could use to deal with the HUD organization.

We left Washington very angry, feeling very disheartened. When we got back to New York, some of us lodged a bias complaint against Mr. Rosenfield because his statements to us were very bigoted, very racist, and very degrading. We wrote a letter to the *Washington Post*, Cable News, and HUD. Leona Smith, Alicia from Dignity Housing, and David Hayden continued trying to get hold of Kemp. They would set up meetings and spend their money going to Washington, and then no one from HUD would show up.

Meanwhile, the city of New York wasn't liking the idea of a grassroots community center at all. In New York, if squatters occupy an abandoned building for at least 30 days, they cannot be evicted without a hearing. So as we got closer to the end of that 30 days, the city turned up the heat.

First the city tried to kick us out of the building, saying it was not a residence. But then they turned around and told the

press and the court that they had given that building in 1988 to a non-profit organization called the New York Foundation for Senior Citizens, which intended to convert it into a *residence* for 82 homeless senior citizens. Whether in fact that was true is questionable. This was November 1989, and the only citizens living there when the squatters took over were junkies. The only improvements that had happened to that old school were the ones made by us.

Old people need housing too, but this location was hardly Mt. Freedom Retirement Resort. This was a drug-infested area, and the city was proposing to put a lot of defenseless old people there? They would have needed a 24-hour police guard at the front door. They would have needed officers to escort these elderly residents to the grocery store and the health clinic. The city's story about the old folks home was just another way for them and the establishment media to play public opinion against us.

Across the street from the ABC Community Center was a vacant lot. Another one of the city's tactics to get us out of ABC was to come up with the idea of letting people stay in the lot. So a lot of people pitched tents and were living there. I guess the problem there for the city came when somebody figured out the lot was more valuable to them when it was empty than it was once there were a lot of homeless people living there. The "property value" deteriorated because people that society said had no value were living there, and so the city changed its mind: the people had to go, period.

The Housing Department finally decided they needed police help and began coming to the door of the ABC Community flanked by officers. We responded by barricading the doors. We also set up an emergency phone tree. We had a secret exit for the eventual time when the police would come to break the door in. At that time, one person would go out the secret exit and make a couple of phone calls. Each of those people would in turn call several other people to come support us, and so on.

Meanwhile, the struggle continued in Tompkins Square Park as well. On October 24th, at a meeting of Community Board 3

in the Alfred E. Smith Parks and Recreation Building, certain factions put forth a proposal to re-establish the 1 a.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. The arguing got raucous, which they probably expected, since a dozen police in riot gear happened to be there. The vote came in 15 to 3 against re-establishing the curfew, with six abstentions and 23 members absent.

On October 26th, I was in Philadelphia for a Union of the Homeless demonstration. We called it our "Halloween Civil Disobedience." This was the brainstorm of Leona Smith and Marian Kramer, from Detroit. I was not there for the strategizing, but let me tell you, when those two women put their heads together, they came up with some grand ideas.

We went to Philadelphia City Hall and into the City Council chambers to protest the lack of housing. Under our clothes, we all had Halloween masks and banners and placards with slogans. Once we were in and sitting down, we waited. When the council started talking about housing, we began pulling out our masks one at a time and putting them on. The council members noticed a few people in the gallery had Halloween masks on. Next time they looked up, a whole row of people had on masks, and there were banners. Finally we had a couple of rows of people all in Halloween masks.

When we were finished and came out of the Philadelphia City Council meeting, I got the word that Tent City had been trying to get hold of me all day:

More than a hundred police had come down hard on the ABC Community.

Around noon, a dozen cops and about six city workers had come to the school and tried to evict the residents of the school. The people in ABC dropped plastic bags full of debris from the third and fourth floor windows to scare off the invaders. It worked. The authorities retreated.

Stanley Cohen and Ronald Kuby, our lawyers, got us an injunction at 4:25 p.m. based on the fact that the squatters had been working in the building more than 30 days, which meant according to the law that we had a right to a hearing.

By about 7:30 that evening, the city lawyers had gotten the injunction thrown out. The police claimed they had made a sweep of the school on September 28th and nobody had been in the building. Once again, the courts believed the cops over the people. It is odd that they claimed nobody was there, since even before we were in it junkies had been living there. And if the squatters hadn't been there, then where were the so-called renovators of The New York Foundation for Senior Citizens?

Word got out to the neighborhood and to our supporters about what was going on. Our friends and supporters quickly began gathering outside of ABC. Shortly after midnight, around a hundred police in riot helmets with billy clubs got together on 4th Street, made themselves into a wall and came toward the crowd, pushing them back. Many people left. Some threw bottles and firecrackers at the police, who were surrounding the building and pushing people, beating up people, tearing down the walls inside that we had built. In the end, 42 people got arrested that night, including Karen.

There was nothing I could do at that point, so I spent the night at a friend's house in Philadelphia. On the Amtrak to New York the next day, I was angry. When I had left, everything was shaping up good. Everybody in the school was getting along, the community was there.

Evening was falling as I walked down 3rd Street in New York toward the ABC Community, and I saw the aftermath. Police barricades and smoldering garbage cans had been set on fire and knocked over. On the block where the school stood, I came to a manned police barricade. They wouldn't let me pass. I could see some people on the other side still protesting, but the authorities had won this battle. The city workers sealed the windows and doors and that was the end of the ABC Community. It was back to the park.

After the ABC Community was raided, I moved in full time with Karen at her apartment on East 12th Street. But it still was not

my home. As far as I was concerned, even a person who was paying rent was a squatter. Any time the rent goes up and you can't afford it, you are going to get kicked out.

I didn't want squatters' rights. People deserve their own housing. The United States, and I am talking about the federal government as well as the state and city governments, has enough monies and resources to initiate and support programs like the ABC Community, like Dignity Housing. What the city did not realize, and still does not realize, is that if the homeless were to get what we were asking for, the city would be winners in the long run because we would become, in fact, business people. We would have to pay taxes on the property value. In the long run, we would be making money for the city all over again.

The politicians always say they don't have the money for social programs, yet their campaign against the homeless at ABC and in Tompkins Square Park used a tremendous amount of police force, a tremendous amount of the Parks Department personnel and resources. Every time they had a raid against us in the park, they paid people overtime. Now they had a drug-shooting gallery at P.S. 105 to protect—overtime again.

Nevertheless, raiding ABC was a smart move for the city politicians strategically because of their agenda. We had been gaining support every day. But with their attack, the city authorities scattered us. For a while we were like fish out of water, floundering around, bouncing around, not knowing which direction to go or what to do.

But we were and are persistent.

Almost immediately we began to make new plans. Mass Transit's planned ABC benefit performance was changed to Judson Memorial Church. Dinkins had won the mayoral election but would not take office until January. We needed to do something to make him realize that his being inaugurated was not enough. We needed to do something extraordinary. Somebody came up with the idea of taking over the city shelters. Actually going in there en masse and taking a shelter. There was another suggestion that we block or walk down Wall Street. But everybody had their own fight, their own reason for being in the

struggle. That caused enough animosity that none of those numerous plans ever solidified.

We should not have allowed a separation between what had been happening at ABC and what was going on at Tompkins Square Park. But because ABC had become more visible for a while, more people paid attention to ABC and directed their energies only to the ABC community. However, people should not have been thinking of ABC alone. This was a mistake on our part. ABC, Tent City, Tompkins Square Park, Homebound, Squatters—they were all about the same thing.

What happened was that Tent City got rebuilt again and a handful of people got back into the ABC Community. All through November 1989 between six and eight each evening at Tompkins Square, those still living at Tent City had been getting visits from the authorities, who put out their fires. Finally, one day we got word that around December 11 they intended to raid us and destroy Tent City again.

After all the mouthing from politicians about how they would not fall back on the discredited shelter system as a public relations "solution" to homelessness, it turned out that one of the first things that was offered to the people in the park was, in fact, shelters. One night in November, 500 homeless and community activists had a meeting with Friedlander, Stern, and the Deputy Borough President. Friedlander and her group came up with a plan to select 150 housing spots which they said they would guarantee to anyone from Tompkins Square Park. Anyone living in Tompkins Square who wanted that housing, Friedlander said, would have it available to them.

Here the authorities were trying to divide and conquer us by telling those from Tent City "we're not even going to allow other people who are homeless, who are on a waiting line, to have first dibs on this." I know the reason they offered this was because the only place in New York City where people fought back regularly was Tompkins Square.

Two people from Tompkins Square Park took the city up on their offer. They went through the city's alcohol detox program and came out and said, "I'm ready for the home."

They were then told, "There is none. You know, we have a housing crisis." Tent City resident Keith Thompson went through the city program twice. The first time they offered him welfare and any shelter in the city he wanted. He refused to go into a shelter.

The second time they offered him welfare and tried to convince him Wards Island was a safe shelter. Wards Island is a shelter where people are robbed by the security guards, where you are not allowed to bring food into the shelter, so you have to eat whatever they offer. Finally they offered Keith welfare and a church program on Beaver Street. Then the church program refused to take him because he had been an activist for homeless people.

Now all this time, Friedlander had been going around telling people that we were agreeing to what she proposed regarding the shelters. She was telling the *Times*, how "today we serviced 60 people." You know what that "service" was? Someone going in and getting a sandwich. The previous summer we fed more people than that every day in Tent City.

In the end, a lot of people went to the shelters, but came back to the park; went through the detox program, but came back to the park. Some of what Friedlander and others had done for people in the park helped us, but the critical point that Friedlander and the rest seemed to forget was that once you send a person through detox and they come out, you have to have some idea what they are going to do then. If they just come out to no job and no housing, then they come out to the park again, they come out to drinking again, and you are back to square one.

During the hard, hectic weeks of that fall and into winter, I hardly had any time to myself or any to spend alone with Karen. My life seemed to be one long strategizing session. Yet I also got energy from those around me because we were fighting for what we knew to be right. We worked to make the community aware that it was not only our fight; it was the fight of all people. We were not fighting to stay in the park; our fight was to get ourselves and other people out of poverty. At the park we were still ready to go to jail if necessary, but we did not want the cops

to come down there thinking the only people they had to deal with were the people living in the park.

It is unfortunate that it often takes a catastrophe to wake people up. For example, in New York we had trouble with bridges. Many of the city's bridges were old, old bridges and already people knew they were in dire need of repair. Yet neither the government nor the mayor did anything about it. Only when the earthquake hit California on October 16, and the bridge in San Francisco fell down, part of it on people's cars, crushing them, did something get done about the New York bridges.

It's the same with homelessness. When the earthquake hits your home or when you have a fire, or something happens to you, *then* you become aware. It is unfortunate that sometimes the very walls themselves have to fall down before people realize what is right in front of them.

There are some good homeless organizations out in California, and we were staying in touch. In December they called me to see how things were going in New York and to let me know the situation out there. Homelessness out there had intensified due to the October quake. A lot of middle-class people lost their homes. What happened was that the new influx of well-to-do homeless in California was being taken care of by relief funds and organizations, while the people who had been homeless all along were still being ignored. The middle-class homeless were getting the support that *all* the homeless should have been getting. There was a saying going around that you are but one paycheck away from becoming homeless yourself. Maybe some middle-class people have two or three paychecks to go yet. But the point remains: if not you, then your brothers or sisters or your friends could quickly become homeless.